

School friends



First Term  
at  
**Silver  
Spires**

Ann Bryant

Secrets...hopes...dreams...

Welcome to

# Silver Spires

where

School Friends

are

for ever!



## About This Book

Secrets, hopes and dreams... School friends are for ever!

Starting at Silver Spires boarding school was really scary, especially sharing a dorm with five girls I'd never met. But now it's like having a sleepover with my best friends every day!

There is one girl who's horrible to me though. She'd be different if she knew my secret, but there's no way I'm going to tell her – or anyone else. Because if I did, my lovely fresh start here would be ruined before the first term is even over!

Katy  
X



First Term  
at  
**Silver  
Spires**



Ann Bryant



For Lesley Hodgson, my best friend, and housemistress par excellence!

My grateful thanks to Cally Fosbery and Emma Stone for all their help

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## Chapter One



“Not long now, Katy,” said Dad, taking his eyes off the road for a second to glance sideways at me.

A shiver of excitement mixed up with big-time nervousness ran through me and I turned round to check on Buddy, my pet rabbit, who was lying in his basket on the back seat. He blinked his velvety eyes at me, just like he had done every other time I’d checked on him during this three-hour-long car journey.

“Nearly there, Bud! Just think, you’re about to make lots of new friends!”

Dad laughed. “I reckon he’d be saying exactly the same thing to you, if he could talk, Kates!”

And that sent another of those shivers rushing through me because I was about to start a brand-new life and it suddenly seemed totally scary. I’d read plenty of books about kids at boarding schools, but I’d no idea what it would actually feel like to be at one myself, living in a boarding house, with a housemistress and a matron instead of a mum and a dad, sleeping in a dormitory with five other girls that I’d never met before, and walking to lessons every morning in less than a minute.

For the last few days I’d done nothing but pack and unpack and repack my cases because I’d changed my mind so often about what clothes to take. Even now I wasn’t sure that I’d brought the right amount. “What if I’ve got too much stuff, Dad?”

“Then you can just leave some of it in your trunk.”

“But what if I’ve not packed *enough*? ”

Dad laughed. “Then you can collect more stuff at half-term. Stop worrying, Kates!”

“I don’t want you to come up to the dorm, Dad.”

“That’s fine.”

“But what if you leave and then I wish you *had* come up to the dorm after all? I’ll be really sad.”

“So maybe it would be best if I *did* come up to the dorm then.”

“No because then I’ll definitely be sad when you’ve gone.”

Dad laughed and patted my leg. “It’ll all be fine. Remember what Mum said. It’s only fear of the unknown that makes us worry. Half an hour after I’ve gone you’ll be right as rain.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. And although I didn’t say anything else out loud, the questions kept going on inside my head. *What if I don’t like the other girls in my dorm? What if they don’t like me? What if I can’t find my way around?*

There was only one thing that would calm me down and that was sketching, so I pulled my pad and pencil out of my backpack and before I knew it I’d covered a double page with designs for dresses and boots. They weren’t new designs though because I couldn’t concentrate on being creative when my mind was on school, wondering how long it would take me to get used to having all my meals in an enormous dining hall and doing my homework with lots of other people in the same room instead of on my own, often in front of the telly. That thought made me suddenly feel homesick, which was a bad sign as I hadn’t even arrived at school yet.

I knew I was really going to miss Mum and Dad. Especially Mum. I don’t have any brothers or sisters so Mum and I are very close, but now I’m on my way to boarding school, America seems even further away than it did when Mum first went over there and it was just me and Dad living at home. At least Mum and I will be able to phone and e-mail each other, but I won’t see her again till Christmas.

It was less than a year ago when Mum and Dad first brought up the idea of boarding school, and I remember how I was instantly filled with excitement at the thought of every single day being like a sleepover. Mum had laughed and put her hands up like a policeman. “Whoa there! It’s not decided yet, Kates! Dad and I are just thinking you might be happier in a boarding school than being at home now I know I’m going to be away filming more and more.”

Everything had happened so fast. One minute Mum was an actress who nobody had really heard of, and the next minute she’d got the part of Lee Brook in an American sitcom that just about everyone in the world watches

– *The Fast Lane*. It was only a small part at first, but then it gradually got bigger because the director and lots of other important people loved the way Mum acted it. In the end they wanted Mum’s character to become one of the main parts in the new series, but it meant Mum would have to live in America, and that’s when she’d started to think I might be happier in a boarding school.

So here I am, on my way to a new life, remembering how Mum hugged me tight before she went off to America two days ago, and said, “We’ll be together for the whole of the main holidays, Kates!” But right now the Christmas holidays seem an eternity away.

Dad threw me another glance. “What’s that you’re sketching?”

“Nothing much.” I snapped the book shut and sat up straighter than straight.

“Oh! Right! Something I’m not supposed to see.” He pretended to be upset.

“Course not!” I laughed. “It’s just that I’m going to watch where we’re going from now on.”

I was quiet after that, staring out of the window at the houses and shops flashing by, then the trees and fields as we went further out into the country. It’s weird having a mum who’s so famous. When she first appeared in *The Fast Lane*, I thought it was the coolest thing ever, especially when some of the kids at primary wanted my autograph, as though having a famous mum made me famous too. And they kept asking me if Mum knew other famous people, and I liked the feeling I got when they all gasped and said, “Wow! That’s so cool!” And some of the younger ones at school would point me out to their mums in loud voices in the playground. “Look, that girl’s mum is on telly! She’s Lee Brook!” And suddenly everyone wanted to be my friend so I got loads of invitations to people’s houses, and even the teachers used to tell me when they’d watched *The Fast Lane* the night before.

It was great getting all this attention, just like suddenly being allowed as much chocolate as I wanted, until one day the chocolate made me feel sick. You see, that’s when I realized the attention had nothing at all to do with me. The kids at school only invited me to their houses because they wanted to get an invite back to my place so they could see Mum. And it grew really annoying when people asked me if Mum could get other famous people’s autographs for them. In fact I started to wonder whether I’d got any *real*

friends at all, and that was a great big scary thought, which made me wish I could switch the clocks back and just have an ordinary mum.

So then I talked to Mum and Dad about it lots, and Dad was always joking around, saying that he knew how I felt because it was the same for him at work – everyone being extra nice to him, just because he'd got a famous wife. Mum said she thought it would settle down when people got used to it, and then everything would be back to normal. She was wrong, though. It never went back to normal and I was never ever sure whether people liked me for myself, or just because I'd got a famous mum. There wasn't anything I could do to change things back to how they were before, but at least I could try my best not to make the same mistake again.

From the moment I knew I was going to boarding school miles away from home, I realized I had the chance for a brand-new start, so I made a great big decision. My plan is to keep Mum and her job a secret from everyone. Well, *nearly* everyone. The Head of the whole school, Ms. Carmichael, knows who my mother is, and so does Miss Carol, the housemistress of Hazeldean, the boarding house that I'll be in. But they're both keeping the information totally confidential. So from now on I can be quite sure that no one will know about Mum. That means I'll be able to tell for certain who my *real* friends are.

A feeling of determination went zapping through me just as we rounded a bend in the road and came across an arch of overhanging trees. I sat up straight and spoke in a gabble. "I remember this bit of road from when I came on my introductory day. It reminded me of a tunnel. We're nearly there, aren't we, Dad?"

"Just around the corner if my memory serves me right," said Dad.

And next minute we came across the big blue sign with silver lettering...

*Silver Spires Boarding School  
For Girls Aged 11–18*

"This is it!" I squeaked, as Dad turned into the long drive and I tried to catch my first glimpse of the Silver Spires main building.

A few seconds later the lane curved round to the right and there it stood, solid and grand in the distance, with its sweeping arches and dark old walls, its diamond-shaped windowpanes and enormous front door, and best of all its tall spires that glinted and gleamed like silver in the sun. The sight of the

building drowned my nervousness in the most magicky feeling of excitement that I was about to become part of a new and brilliant, buzzing world. But a few seconds later the nervousness sprang back as we began to pass boarding houses with cars parked outside and girls and parents and houseparents milling around, and occasionally a man in overalls carrying cases.

And before I knew it the road had forked off to the left and there was Hazeldean.

“Looks like we’ve come at a good time!” said Dad. “Not many cars here. I guess we’ve missed the rush.”

I looked at my watch. Twenty-five to five. In the letter it said you could arrive at any time between three and five, so we must be among the last people. I undid my seat belt, feeling suddenly relieved that I’d decided to wear my jeans because most of the girls I could see were in either jeans or tracksuit bottoms. I’d so nearly worn my swirly layered skirt, which I got from the Oxfam shop, and my new brown boots, and the beautiful blue dangly earrings, because those are the kinds of things I love wearing. But I absolutely did not want to stand out, especially not on my first day. All the same, my top half wasn’t exactly plain because I was wearing one of Mum’s tops. It shrunk in the wash, so it’s too small for her but it fits me perfectly. It’s made of what I call crinkly silk with a lacy bit round the top and the cuffs, and it’s brown but it looks as though it’s faded in the sun. Mum says it looks great with my dark skin and hair. I think Mum might be a bit biased though and I was beginning to wish I’d just worn a plain T-shirt.

“Hello, it’s Katy, isn’t it?” I’d only just opened the car door and there was Miss Carol, the housemistress, giving me a big smile. “Lovely to see you again!” she said. I remembered her clearly from my visit last term and really liked the way she made you feel so welcome. She shook hands with Dad. “Hello, Mr. Parsons. You’ve arrived at a good time. It’s all been a bit mad, but it’s quietened down again now.” Then she spotted Buddy in the back. “Aha! A customer for Pets’ Place. I’ll find someone to show you where to take him.” She chuckled. “Or is it her?”

“It’s him,” I answered, as a man with a luggage carrier appeared by the car.

“Good timing, Tony! This is Katy Parsons. I think she’s in Amethyst dorm.”

The man nodded at me then put my cases on the luggage carrier. “I’ll check on the noticeboard, Miss C.”

“You’re welcome to go up to the dorm, Mr. Parsons,” Miss Carol said to Dad. “Lots of parents have been settling their daughters in, though most of them have gone now.”

Dad looked at me and I shook my head, the decision suddenly made. “It’s okay, I’ll go up on my own, actually.”

Miss Carol nodded. “That’s fine. Let’s introduce you to one or two of the other Year Sevens.” She steered me away from Dad and towards the entrance to Hazeldean. “There’s Mia Roberts. Perfect! Mia was one of the first to get here and she’s in the same dorm as you, Katy, so she can take you up when you’ve registered with Matron.”

The girl standing by the door was smaller than me, with a pale serious face and long blonde hair in a ponytail. She looked nice but I still felt a bit anxious because everything was moving so fast and what if I didn’t get the chance to say bye to Dad? Miss Carol must have realized. “Don’t worry, Katy, you’ll see your dad before he goes.” She patted my shoulder, and I thought again how kind she was. Then she introduced me to Mia who broke into a big smile.

“Hi, Katy! You’re in Amethyst dorm with me.” She went a bit pink. “There are only two other girls from our dorm here so far – Jessica and Grace...except I seem to have lost them.”

I nearly laughed because it sounded so funny, as though Mia thought it was *her* fault that the girls had gone missing. Miss Carol must have been thinking the same thing. “I’m sure they’ll turn up!” she chuckled. Then more cars pulled up and off she rushed to greet them, talking over her shoulder. “I’ll tell your dad you’re just registering, Katy.”

I nodded and saw that Dad was talking to another lady who I thought I recognized from my visit last term.

“That’s Miss Fosbrook,” said Mia, following my gaze. “She’s the assistant housemistress.”

The hall at Hazeldean was filled with chatter and laughter. It was obvious who were the older students because they were hugging each other and talking loud and fast, sharing their holiday news with shining eyes, and leaning forward to whisper their secrets.

“It feels funny being new, doesn’t it?” said Mia, quietly to me.

I nodded. "I wish I could press a fast-forward button and know everyone, and be used to all the rules and everything."

Mia giggled. "Me too." Then she led me over to a noticeboard and pointed at the list with the heading *Amethyst*. "Look, these are the girls in our dorm."

We read the names out loud together. "Mia, Grace, Katy, Jessica, Naomi, Georgie."

Then Mia giggled again. "I remember Georgie from when I visited the school last term. She was totally mad and didn't seem worried about anything. She told me she was growing her hair and that next time we saw each other it'd be long enough for a ponytail. But she probably won't even remember me," Mia added in a bit of a sorrowful voice.

I was just about to say that I was sure Georgie would remember her straight away when a great boom came from across the hall. "Have you two girls registered?"

I turned round to see a stern-looking lady sitting at a table on the other side of the hall. She was peering at us over a pair of glasses with no rims.

"Miss Jennings, the matron," whispered Mia out of the corner of her mouth. "I registered earlier. Come on." She hurried over to the table and I followed her.

Miss Jennings hardly glanced at me. "Join the queue while it's nice and short," she said, then carried on registering the girls in front of me.

"Scary!" mouthed Mia, rolling her eyes.

"You're not kidding!" I whispered.

At the back of the line we started talking in our normal voices. "Have you got a pet?" Mia asked.

"Yes, a rabbit...called Buddy."

"That's a cool name. I've got two guinea pigs, Porgy and Bess. I'll take you down to Pets' Place when your mum and dad have gone."

"Oh...I just came with my dad actually... Mum's away."

Something tightened inside me because this was the first time Mum had been mentioned.

"Hope your dad doesn't drive off with Buddy by mistake. That's what my parents did. We said our goodbyes really quickly so we wouldn't be too sad, only then they realized they'd driven off with Porgy and Bess so they had to come back and go through it all again!"

"Oh, poor you."

“Your turn next,” she added.

At first I thought she meant that it was my turn to be sad, but then I saw that she was talking about the line I was in. I’d come to the front, and now that I could see Matron up close I thought she looked even scarier, her face was set in such a stern expression.

“Katy Parsons,” I said quietly.

She smiled and nodded. “Right, Katy, you’re in Amethyst dorm.” Then she looked over her glasses at Mia. “Good. You can look after Katy. Two of the others are already here.” She ran her finger down the list. “So... just Georgie Henderson and Naomi Okanta still to come. Remember the code?” Matron suddenly whipped her glasses off and opened her eyes wide as if Mia was a spy who’d been captured and was getting a grilling.

“Two one two seven.”

Matron nodded and said, “You’ll need to remember that too, Katy. It opens Hazeldean’s front door. Now, off you go.”

Mia and I went across the hall towards the staircase.

“Amethyst is a jewel, isn’t it?” I said.

“Yes, the Year Seven dorms in all the boarding houses are named after jewels, like Ruby and Topaz and Emerald...”

Before we reached the stairs, Dad suddenly appeared. He smiled at Mia then turned to me. I know my dad and I knew he was trying not to show he was sad. “I’ll say bye then, Katy.”

My throat hurt and I had to blink a lot to stop the tears from gathering.

“Here’s young Buddy.” Dad put down the basket and gave me a tight hug. I hugged him back and everything swam about inside my brain for a few seconds because I was suddenly confused by a vivid memory of Mum dropping me at playgroup for the very first time, and I felt like I was three years old again, crying and crying and refusing to let go of Mum’s jacket. Only now I was eleven and I mustn’t cry. Not in front of Mia and the rest of the girls in this hall. But the tears were almost there and I wasn’t sure that I could stop them.

Dad broke away from the hug first and pointed down at Buddy, who was wriggling around in his basket. “Think it’s time he got out of there, Kates! I should get him settled in if I were you.” He winked at me and squeezed my shoulder, then turned to go, and I swallowed and swallowed with all my might and clenched my teeth.

As I watched Dad go to the door, the words that Mum had said just two days ago flooded into my mind. *“If you ever feel lonely or worried about anything, you can tell Buddy all about it. He’ll help you sort it out.”* When she’d said that, it had made sense, but I wasn’t so sure now. It didn’t seem possible that one little rabbit would be able to take away this awful feeling I had. I didn’t want Dad to drive home with the memory of my sad face, though, so I made a massive effort and called out, “Bye, Dad,” then gave him a big smile when he turned round.

He grinned. “Talk soon, Kates.”

And a second later he was out of sight. But only just, because he’d almost collided with a girl who was crashing through the doorway. She was carrying three shoulder bags and one of them was pulling her sweatshirt off her shoulder. Her face was pink from rushing, her head was bobbing about, and her eyes darted everywhere, before they suddenly settled on Mia and sparkled like mad. Then she dropped all her bags and shrieked out, “Look! It’s nearly as long as yours!” And she swung her head from side to side, clouting herself in the eyes with the end of her short ponytail. Finally she rushed at Mia. “Hi! Remember me?”

Mia’s eyes shone with happiness as she nodded, and introduced me. “This is Katy, Georgie.”

Georgie flashed me a quick grin then bent down and started squinting at Buddy through the hole in the basket. It seemed like she was talking to him but she wasn’t. “We’d better be in the same dorm, Mia, otherwise I’m going straight to Miss Carol and demanding a transfer!”

“It’s okay, we’re both in Amethyst, and so is Katy,” said Mia.

“Good!” said Georgie to Buddy, patting his basket before jumping to her feet and eyeing me carefully. “I wish I had hair like yours,” she sighed. “You look like you ought to be modelling in a hair advert. How much did you have to pay it to lie flat?”

I couldn’t help laughing but Georgie wasn’t expecting an answer because she was flicking her ponytail from side to side again. “See, Mia? Impressed at how fast it’s grown? I’ve been eating buckets of raw jelly for the calcium. That’s why.”

Mia opened her mouth to say something but Georgie was marching over to Matron’s desk, grinning all over her face. “Hello, Miss Jennings,” she said in a bright voice. “Remember me?”

“How could I forget?” said Matron, running her finger down the list looking for Georgie’s name, but I noticed she was smiling a bit. “Amethyst dorm, and the Hazeldean code is two one two seven. Got that?”

“Twenty-one twenty-seven,” said Georgie. “Easy! I’ll be thirty in that year.”

“Don’t you mean a *hundred* and thirty?” asked Mia.

“Who cares? I’ll be ancient anyway, so that’s how I’ll remember the code.”

Matron raised her eyebrows and said, “Hmm,” then went back to writing whatever she’d been writing before. But I was giggling like mad because Georgie was so funny. And a moment later she was grinning and waving energetically at Miss Fosbrook, who was talking to some girls just inside the door.

“I’ll be up to see how you’re all getting on with your unpacking in just a few minutes,” said Miss Fosbrook, smiling cheerfully.

“We’d better take Buddy to Pets’ Place first,” said Mia.

Georgie rolled her eyes. “Excuse me if I don’t join you,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Can’t bear the smell of all those animals, you see.”

Mia gave her a bit of a teachery look and Georgie immediately said, “Oops, I mean *pets*. Sorry, Mamma Mia. Anyway, my mum and dad are coming up to the dorm with me once they’ve finally finished yakking away to Miss Carol.”

So for the second time in under thirty seconds Georgie had made me laugh, and as I followed Mia out of Hazeldean and we walked round the back of the building towards Pets’ Place, I had the feeling that perhaps it was going to be all right at Silver Spires.

## Chapter Two



Pets' Place is a huge shed with a garden round the back of it. There are runs in the garden for rabbits and guinea pigs, and snug little hutches with bags of hay and straw and food in the shed. I was glad that Buddy was going to be living in such a lovely place, all safe and warm and smelly. Mia and I agreed that we'd come down here together to feed our pets every day.

"The caretaker told me he locks the shed when it gets dark," Mia explained, "but there's a spare key under that window."

So we introduced Buddy to Porgy and Bess, and then put him in a hutch. I checked he'd got enough hay, and kissed his head, then we went back to Hazeldean.

"I think I like Hazeldean best out of all the boarding houses I've seen," I told Mia. "The others don't look so warm and homely, do they?"

Mia agreed. "I love all the vines growing up the walls."

"And the hazelnut tree at the back," I added.

We went inside and got a surprise because the hall was almost empty. Apart from Miss Carol and Matron, who were talking in low voices at the far end, there was just one girl with straight, dark brown, shoulder length hair and a golden tan, standing by the window. I guessed she was a Year Eight or Nine.

We were just about to make our way up to the dorm when I heard Miss Carol whisper the name "Naomi Okanta" to Matron. Mia must have heard too because she raised her eyebrows at me, and mouthed, "That's the other girl in our dorm. What did she say about her?"

I shrugged a *don't know* and realized at the same time that the girl by the window was sighing rather noisily. I looked at her more carefully. On her head was perched a pair of sunglasses, and round her waist was a wide studded purple belt. She had a very expensive-looking multicoloured bag

made of all different materials slung over her shoulder. In fact I guessed the whole outfit must have cost an awful lot. I couldn't help staring, but then she glanced in my direction and saw me looking, so I quickly smiled and asked her if she was okay.

"I'm just waiting for one of the porters to bring my trunk in," she said, in quite a loud voice.

I looked to see if Miss Carol had heard but she'd disappeared and so had Matron.

"Oh...right... What year are you in?" I asked.

"Seven," she said, as though it was a disease.

Mia bit her lip. "Do you know what dorm you're in?"

"Opal," the girl answered.

I wasn't sure what to do then because she was looking out of the window again, and obviously didn't want company. But then I suddenly wondered whether it was all a big cover-up because she was actually feeling miserable and homesick, so I made one more huge effort.

"I really love your outfit...especially that bag..."

And that's when she turned and looked me up and down very slowly. The tiniest shadow of a frown came over her face. "Thanks." And I felt myself blushing because it was obvious she didn't think much of what I was wearing.

"Tony is on his way, Lydia," came Miss Fosbrook's puffed-out voice. She was hurrying downstairs. "He'll take your trunk to your room. Sorry there's been a bit of a wait." Then she saw me and Mia. "Oh, you've met Katy and Mia. That's good. You're not in the same dorm as them, but—"

"Look!"

Miss Fosbrook never got to finish her sentence because Lydia was pointing out of the window, with an astonished look on her face. "Who's that?"

"Ah," said Miss Fosbrook, hurrying to the door, "I think... Yes, it's Naomi." She turned round and shooed us all away. "Off you go, girls." Then when we all just stood there, "Off you go!"

But as soon as Miss Fosbrook went outside, where Miss Carol was already waiting, Lydia tossed her head and stepped out of the door behind her.

I caught a glimpse of a big black car, the length of at least two ordinary cars, and couldn't resist sneaking a look, despite Miss Fosbrook's

instructions. I stayed in the doorway though, and Mia hovered uncertainly beside me. “We’d better go, Katy...” she murmured, but her eyes were wide and it was obvious she was as curious as me. “Wow! Imagine riding around in one of those, with blacked-out windows and everything. I wonder if Naomi is famous or something.”

I kept quiet about the fact that I’d been in a limousine like this one quite a few times with Mum, and thought to myself, *This is where it all starts – the secrets, the hiding of the truth.*

Miss Carol was beckoning to the two men who were helping with all the cases and trunks, and I heard the one called Tony telling the other man in a low voice that the girl arriving was a Ghanaian princess.

Mia gasped. “Did you hear that, Katy? A princess from Ghana!” Then her voice turned to a squeak. “Look, her dad’s getting out!”

Lydia turned round and spoke in a don’t-you-even-know-that voice. “It’s not her father, it’s the driver. We had a driver when we lived in Kenya.”

Mia didn’t say anything, but I saw her eyes widen as the driver went round to open the passenger doors, and at that moment Georgie appeared.

“I’ve been looking *everywhere* for... Oh wow!” As she stared at the car her jaw fell open.

“Naomi’s a princess, Georgie,” squeaked Mia. “And we’re not supposed to be here, so we’d better go inside quick, before Miss Carol and Miss Fosbrook see us.” She hurried off, but I stayed glued to the action. I couldn’t help it.

“Well *I’m* not going inside,” said Lydia. “It’s no big deal, you know, being a princess in Africa. There are loads more princesses in Africa than in Europe.”

Georgie pulled a face, jerked her head in Lydia’s direction and mouthed, “Who’s that?”

“Lydia,” I mouthed back. On the drive, Miss Carol and Miss Fosbrook took a couple of steps forwards, and out of the back of the car stepped the most beautiful girl, with a glamorous-looking woman coming out behind her.

“Is that her mum?” I whispered to Georgie.

“Obviously,” Lydia answered immediately.

Georgie grinned at me. “See that? I didn’t even move my lips!”

“And that will be her father,” added Lydia, ignoring Georgie.

The man and woman were dressed in swirling gold and white but Naomi wasn't wearing traditional African clothes. She just looked like any of us in her jeans and top, apart from her hair, which was perfectly braided and beaded. I was certain that at any minute Miss Carol or Miss Fosbrook would turn round and see us standing there, so I grabbed Georgie and pulled her inside. "Come on, we can watch through the window."

Georgie walked in backwards so she could keep watching. "Look, shiny white suitcases!" she squeaked, as two other servants who had appeared from the other side of the car started unloading the boot. Tony went hurrying over to them. Then Naomi's parents each gave her a peck on the cheek and said something to Miss Carol, before getting back into their car. Both the servants and the driver did small bows to Naomi and waited till she'd turned to walk away from them before getting in the car and driving off.

"Hurry up, you two," called Mia from the top of the stairs. "Miss Fosbrook will be cross if we're still hanging around when she told us to go."

"No, she won't," announced Georgie as she skipped up to the first-floor landing to join Mia, "because Naomi is in our dorm and we're the welcome party, aren't we?"

I had to admit she'd got a good point, so we all peered down, and I felt exactly as I had done when I'd been a little girl and should have been in bed, but I'd crept onto the landing to peek at Mum and Dad's guests arriving for dinner.

And suddenly Naomi was in the hall with Lydia right beside her, and Miss Carol and Miss Fosbrook just behind.

Lydia looked completely different when she smiled, much prettier. "I lived in Kenya for two years so I'm used to servants and everything too. My parents aren't royal like yours but they're famous," she went on.

Naomi looked at her with big eyes in a beautiful calm face but didn't say anything.

"We're not in the same dorm at the moment, Naomi," Lydia carried on, "but I'm sure we'd be allowed to swap...?" She glanced at Miss Carol with her eyebrows raised in a question.

"We stick with the same dorm mates for the first half of term, Lydia," Miss Carol said firmly, "and then in exceptional cases changes can be made." She smiled at Tony, who was taking Naomi's cases upstairs.

“What about *my* cases?” Lydia called out.

“Have Lydia Palmer’s cases been taken to Opal dorm?”

“Yep,” replied Tony, puffing a bit as he carried on walking.

“Well I didn’t see—” Lydia began.

“Opal is one of the ground-floor dorms, Lydia, and there’s a side entrance, which is only used at the start of term,” Miss Carol explained.

Miss Fosbrook put her hand on Lydia’s shoulder to guide her along the corridor. “Let’s go and meet your dormies.”

“I’ll see you at supper, Naomi,” Lydia said. “Save me a place if you get there first, yeah?”

Naomi bit her lip and nodded. Her eyes were full of confusion and everything started to click into place in my mind. I might have been wrong but I couldn’t help wondering whether the reason Naomi’s parents had deliberately dropped her off a bit late and left very quickly was because Naomi didn’t want lots of people fussing round her. A picture of Miss Carol whispering to Matron flashed through my head. That was it! That was why Miss Fosbrook had shooed Mia and me and Lydia away. I bet we weren’t supposed to know that Naomi was a princess. I bet Naomi, like me, was trying to keep a big secret. But now there were four people who knew it – Lydia, Georgie, Mia and me. Poor Naomi.

I was suddenly desperate to help her guard her secret. But I could have been wrong. She might have only been looking confused because she was new and it was all a bit strange. I’d better keep quiet till I found out the truth. An enormous wave of relief swept over me that I’d made the decision not to tell anyone about Mum. I had the feeling that Lydia was only acting all friendly towards Naomi, wanting to be in her dorm and everything, because she liked the idea of being friends with a princess. If she knew who *my* mum was I wonder if she’d be all over me like a rash.

Georgie went skipping down to the hall, grinning all over her face, while Mia and I followed. “Hi, Naomi, I’m Georgie. You’re in Amethyst dorm with me and Mia and Katy.”

Miss Carol ran a finger down one of the lists on the noticeboard. “And as well as you four, there’s Grace and Jessica. They’re up in the dorm, I think.”

“Hi,” said Naomi, smiling at all of us. She didn’t look quite so anxious now.

“Right,” said Miss Carol, “can you three take Naomi up to Amethyst? Miss Fosbrook, Matron and I are about to do a round of all the dorms to see how the unpacking is going, then it’s supper in twenty minutes.”

So up we went, Georgie in the lead. “All these steps every day are going to kill me,” she said as we rounded the corner on the second landing. “If Lydia wants to swap dorms she can swap with me, any day!”

“Is this your first boarding school?” Naomi suddenly asked, sounding a bit hesitant. She wasn’t looking at any one of us in particular and I was the one who answered.

“Yes. It feels a bit weird at the moment.”

“I’m going to have a ball!” Georgie’s voice rang out loudest and made us all laugh. She carried on as though she hadn’t noticed. “What about you, Naomi? Is this *your* first boarding school? Do princesses go to boarding school in Africa?”

I nearly gasped. The look of shock on Naomi’s face made me certain I’d guessed right about it being a secret that she was a princess, and my mind went into overdrive trying to think of a way to help her out.

“Er...I’ve never boarded before,” she said hesitantly.

“Is it true that you’re a Ugandan princess, though?” Georgie went on. I knew she was only being her usual bubbly self but I wished that she’d be quiet.

Naomi bit her lip. “Ghanaian. Only—”

“I’m going to be sleeping in the same room as a princess!” interrupted Georgie. “I can’t wait to tell my friends back home.”

“Georgie,” I started to say, “maybe Naomi doesn’t want people going on about...”

But I don’t think Georgie even heard me. She was in full flow and there was no stopping her. “Do you live in London?”

Naomi nodded.

“What, like Kensington or somewhere?”

“Not...exactly Kensington...” Poor Naomi was totally embarrassed and this time I was determined to make sure I got Georgie off the subject of princesses.

“Stop talking and show us the dorm, Georgie! We must be nearly there.”

Georgie chuckled. “Any second now!”

I quickly turned to Naomi. “I haven’t been in the dorm yet either because I was putting my rabbit in Pets’ Place.”

Naomi shot me a grateful smile.

“It’s the next one on the right,” Mia said. “We’ve got our own little hallway-type thing. Look!” And for a moment I forgot about Naomi and secrets as a big wave of excitement came over me. We’d rounded a corner and there was a little alcove with beams set in the walls on either side of us, and ahead of us the heavy door said *AMETHYST* at the top. Below was a list of our names. Seeing my name on the door like that made everything seem suddenly very real. My new life was starting. Right here and now. Mia turned the handle and opened the door, then the four of us piled in.

A girl with copper-coloured curly hair was sitting on one of the beds cutting out bits of newspaper with her manicure scissors. She looked up and smiled at me and Naomi. “I’m Jess and this is Grace.” Grace was sitting next to Jess. She looked very slim in her jogging bottoms and a plain white top.

Georgie finished off the introductions. “This is Katy, and this is Naomi!” She tapped us both on the head. “And you’ve met Mia, haven’t you?” Then she shot over to a cabin bed with a bright yellow duvet, and climbed the ladder. “I’ve bagged this one.”

There were six beds, each one part of a unit with a desk area and drawers below, and a narrow wardrobe at the side. Already the dorm looked like home, with all its colours and clutter. Tucked under the roof, it had a sloping ceiling on one side, and a lovely shiny, uneven, wooden floor with rugs on it, and instead of being a plain rectangle, it had recesses which gave it a cosy feel. Naomi’s and my cases were right in the middle of the floor.

The others had all unpacked their stuff and Grace was watching Jess sticking the bits of newspaper onto her pinboard to make a frame.

“You’re so artistic, Jess!” she said. And I agreed.

There was a pinboard above each of the beds and I noticed that Mia had already covered hers with photos of her family and her guinea pigs.

Georgie’s stomach suddenly gave an enormous rumble, which made everyone laugh. “Quick, get unpacking you two,” she said urgently. “It’s got to be time for supper soon. I’m starving.”

“Er...which bed do you want?” I asked Naomi.

“You choose. You got here before me,” she replied, and when I hesitated she added, “I don’t mind, honestly.”

My eyes couldn’t help straying over to the bed tucked in a snug little alcove. “I’d love this one...as long as...”

"That's fine," said Naomi with a smile, "because I secretly preferred this one!"

I wondered whether she really did prefer it or if she was just a really kind girl.

For the next ten minutes we both worked hard. Georgie went from Naomi to me, looking at all our things as we unpacked and giving a running commentary. "Lovely skirt, Katy. If my legs looked like yours I'd have to steal it from you, I'm afraid!"

When Miss Fosbrook came in we were all laughing like mad.

"Well, this dorm gets first prize for being the merriest one!" she said. "Don't worry about sorting everything out before supper but make sure you at least unpack everything so Tony can take your cases down to the storage room. See you in the dining hall in a few minutes. It's in the main building and there'll be plenty of older girls to tell you where to go if you get lost, all right?"

We all nodded and Naomi and I got straight back to work as soon as she'd gone, while Georgie peered into Naomi's jewellery case. "Wow, look at all this silver and gold! Have you got a tiara as well?"

Naomi looked embarrassed again, and my heart raced a bit because I'd decided the time had come to have a word with Georgie. But as it happened Naomi got there first. She suddenly stood up straight and spoke in a firm voice, looking Georgie right in the eyes. "No, I haven't got a tiara and neither have I got a throne to sit on, okay?"

Georgie swallowed and went a bit pink and I found myself feeling sorry for her because I knew she couldn't help being bubbly and curious. It's just her character. There was another awkward silence then Naomi sighed a big sigh. "Sorry, that came out all wrong. I didn't mean to sound horrible. It's just that I don't want anyone to think I'm different at all." She looked down and sighed again. "Because... I'm not."

"Oh come on, Naomi, you *are* different!" said Georgie, sticking her chin up. "You've got a limousine and servants and a driver. You're a princess!"

I heard Grace and Jess gasp and I tried to swallow but my mouth felt all dry.

Naomi was still looking down. "I know..." she said in a small voice. Then finally she looked up and the truth came out rather shakily. "I didn't really want anyone to know, you see..." Her eyes filled with confusion again as she turned to me. "How did you find out?"

I felt guilty and sorry at the same time. “We heard one of the men say it. We didn’t know...it was a secret...”

Mia’s face looked very pale. “We won’t tell anyone, Naomi. We’ll keep it to ourselves, won’t we?” She looked round at the rest of us and we all nodded.

“Sorry, Naomi,” Georgie said, looking a bit sheepish. “You should have shut me up ages ago. I know I’ve got a big mouth.”

Naomi suddenly looked relieved. “It’s okay.”

“But I don’t get why you want to keep it a secret,” went on Georgie. “If *I* was a princess I’d be shouting it from the rooftops. I’d love having people swarming round me, and servants bowing and everything. It’d be the coolest thing ever.”

“It might be cool at first,” I blurted out, “but after a bit you’d wonder if people were friends with you for yourself or just because of your family.” Then I suddenly realized what I’d said and tried desperately not to go red. “I mean...I guess that’s what would happen...isn’t it?”

Naomi nodded hard. “Yes, that’s it. And people think you’re stuck-up too. That’s what I had at my old school, and now I want to make a new start.”

I knew exactly how she felt. It might have been *me* talking. I stood up straight to make myself feel strong. I was more determined than ever, now, to keep my own secret safe.

## Chapter Three



Georgie pretended to wave a wand over Naomi. “You *shall* have a new start, Cinderella!” she declared in a warbly voice, as we all laughed. “I wish I could be as wise as you,” she added. Then she must have caught sight of Grace’s Olympic Games poster. “That’s cool,” she said, pointing.

Grace broke into a big beam and I thought how pretty she was, with her dark olive skin and shiny black hair. “I love everything to do with sport,” she said quite shyly.

“The opposite to me then,” Georgie replied, wandering over to my desk and picking up my photo of Mum and Dad. I couldn’t help tensing up even though I didn’t think she could possibly recognize Mum. I’d deliberately chosen a photo that had been taken on our holiday in the Alps last year, with Mum dressed from head to toe in her ski suit and wearing an enormous pair of dark glasses and a furry hood. Even though you can hardly see her face at all, the photo still reminds me of her, and that’s all that matters.

“Is that your parents?” Georgie asked, looking closely and frowning hard.

But I didn’t have to answer because she’d put the photo down and was looking at Mia’s pinboard.

Mia sighed. “It reminds me of home,” she said quietly.

Then Georgie surprised us all by rushing over, grabbing Mia’s shoulders dramatically and looking right into her eyes. “Getting homesick is strictly not allowed!” she said, imitating Matron’s deep voice absolutely perfectly. Mia broke into a giggle as Georgie kicked over a blue bag by mistake. She bent down and propped it back up again. “Is this a music case?”

“Yes, I play piano,” said Mia.

Georgie put her hands on her hips, pretending to be cross. “You never told me that!” Then a moment later she was back at my desk, this time with my sketchbook in her hands. “And what’s this, Katy? You’re not another

artist, are you? How is a poor girl who's only interested in acting going to survive in a dorm with two artists, a musician, a sports maniac and a princess?" She glanced at Naomi. "Whoops! Sorry."

Everyone laughed and I tried to get my sketchbook back. "It's nothing much, really..."

But Georgie had already started flipping the pages and the others had gathered round to look.

"Fashion designs!" said Jess. "They're brilliant! I could never do anything like this."

"Me neither," said Grace. "For a start, I'm not interested in clothes."

"Not interested in clothes!" said Georgie, in high-pitched surprise. "How can you not be interested in clothes?"

"Easy," said Grace. "I spend all my time in tracksuits."

"I wish I looked more fashionable," said Mia, "but I'm too small!"

"No, you're not," I quickly reassured her. "I could design something that you'd look great in."

Her eyes shone. "Could you?"

"What about me?" Georgie asked. "Do you design theatrical costumes?"

I couldn't answer though because there was a loud knock on the door and as I was nearest I answered it. Lydia was standing there in a completely different outfit from the one she'd been wearing earlier. She looked really glamorous in black shiny trousers, suede boots with little stiletto heels and a grey and blue top. Her hair was tied back in a thick ponytail, except for two loose ringlets, one on either side of her face, and over her shoulder was the same bag she'd had earlier, only now there was a magazine poking out and I could clearly see Mum's picture was on the front cover.

My heart felt like a yo-yo for a few seconds, but then I told myself to calm down and remember no one could read my mind. I just had to act normally and make sure I didn't go red. But even if I *did* go red, no one would know why, as I don't particularly look like Mum. So actually I didn't have anything to worry about.

"Hi, are you coming for supper? Everyone's on their way over to the dining hall."

Lydia's eyes were on Naomi but it was Georgie who answered for all of us. "We'll be down in a minute."

A look of irritation flicked across Lydia's face, then she glanced round our dorm. "I think this is a bit bigger than Opal." She wrinkled her nose.

“But there’s still not much room for all your stuff, is there?” Again she seemed to be addressing her words to Naomi only, but this time it was Jess who answered, and I could tell by the look on her face that she didn’t like Lydia.

“Depends how much stuff you’ve got.”

Lydia ignored Jess. “I’ll save you a place, Naomi.” Then off she went, clicking down the corridor.

“I’m starving,” said Grace, making for the door. The rest of us were all following when Georgie put her hands up like a traffic cop and said, “Hold on! There’s something I have to do first.” She clicked her fingers at me.

“Pencil, Katy!” So I went diving back to my desk to get her one, and then we all watched as she crossed out our surnames from the list on the door and added some words of her own. A moment later we were grinning at her handiwork, and I was smiling inside too because it gave me that lovely warm feeling that we were already becoming a kind of team – the Amethyst team.

*Katy the Queen of Style*

*Grace the Sportswoman*

*Jess the Artist*

*Mia the Musician*

*Naomi the Princess*

*Georgie the Actress*

Immediately we were all racing for our rubbers. “Why don’t you just advertise to the whole world that Naomi’s a princess, Georgie!” said Jess sarcastically.

Georgie rubbed out the word “Princess” and changed it to “Wise One”, which made Naomi look a bit embarrassed.

“You really are going to have to concentrate on keeping your mouth shut, Georgie!” I told her.

“Yes, and talking of keeping your mouth shut, someone needs to tell Lydia that Naomi wants it kept secret that she’s a princess,” Mia pointed out.

“So she definitely knows?” asked Naomi.

I nodded.

Naomi looked thoughtful and I wondered if she was remembering how Lydia wanted to be in the same dorm as her when she'd only just met her. "I'll tell her at supper," she said firmly.

Supper was absolutely delicious – lamb balti followed by apple flan. All the Amethyst girls sat together and Lydia sat at the end of the table, next to Naomi. She spent the whole time telling Naomi how boring her dormies were and how much nicer she thought Amethyst dorm was.

"Er...don't forget to tell Lydia about your secret," I reminded Naomi hesitantly when she was about to go for her pudding.

"Oh yes." She gave me a grateful smile and dropped her voice. "I don't really want anyone to know I'm a princess, Lydia. It might make people act differently around me..."

Lydia's eyes shot open. "I know what you mean! It's awful when people won't leave you alone because they think you're someone important." She looked round at all of us and I could tell she was dying for someone to ask who her parents were, but the others were deep in their own conversations and Naomi was looking to see where the puddings were. The moment she'd left the table Lydia turned to me with a cross look on her face and spoke in a low, cold voice. "You didn't have to get Naomi to tell me to keep quiet about her, you know. I'm not about to spill her secret. Obviously!"

I was too shocked to reply because I hadn't meant to be bossy or anything so I mumbled something about pudding and went after Naomi.

When we'd all finished eating, the Deputy Head of Silver Spires, Mrs. Andrews, announced that girls in Year Seven should go back to their boarding houses for a guided tour, followed by a meeting in the common room with the houseparents. Mrs. Andrews also explained that Ms. Carmichael, the Head of the whole school, would be welcoming us officially to Silver Spires in assembly the next day, but right now she was over in the sixth form block.

There were two guided tours of Hazeldean. I was in Matron's group with the rest of Amethyst, and Lydia, who insisted on coming with us instead of joining her own dorm. Matron told us rule after rule on the way. "Two people will be in charge of keeping the kitchen tidy and if it's not tidy it will be locked so you won't be able to make hot drinks for yourselves... This is the boot room for all your wellies. Again, two people responsible for clearing it up... You'll find the rotas on the noticeboard..." There was so much to take in. I didn't know how I'd ever remember everything. "This is

the laundry for dirty washing. Make sure you put dark colours in here and light colours in here. See how it's all clearly labelled..." The tour seemed like a whirlwind and we were easily the first group to arrive at the big common room. Then the older girls started coming in too, for the housemistress's talk.

Lydia dropped into the comfiest-looking chair in the room, crossed her legs and started flipping over the pages of her magazine, commenting on funky vest tops and glam bags, but no one was really listening to her.

"Do you feel homesick, Katy?" Naomi asked me quietly as we sat down on a sofa.

"A bit," I said. "But I'm trying not to think about it too much. What about you?"

"I think I'll miss having time to myself." Her voice was soft and I felt flattered to be the one she'd chosen to confide in. "But I'll also miss my family."

"Have you got brothers and sisters?"

"Two older sisters who've gone back to Ghana, and a little brother with my parents in London. Have you?"

"No, there's just me."

"You poor thing," said Lydia. "I've got a big family too, Naomi."

Naomi carried on talking to me. "Are your parents abroad?"

I told myself to keep calm. It was only natural that everyone wanted to find out about everyone else in the first few days. It would soon be forgotten.

"My mum works in America at the moment, and my dad has to travel quite a bit too. But we don't live abroad."

Lydia shut her magazine and leaned forwards when she heard me say that. "My mum and dad work in New York. They're company directors."

My heart started beating faster now we were discussing actual jobs, but luckily I didn't have to say anything because everyone started chiming in with what their parents' jobs were. I was just feeling nice and calm when I practically had a heart attack because Georgie suddenly stabbed Lydia's magazine. "That's Cally Jamieson who plays Lee Brook! She's soooooo cool! I can't wait for *The Fast Lane*. Only five days! It's the best thing ever."

I quickly bent down and took my shoe off, then spent ages pretending my sock was stuck under my heel, pulling it up and straightening it out, while

the conversation about *The Fast Lane* sizzled and sparkled around me. I had to sit back up again eventually and then I realized that the other two groups had arrived and the whole common room seemed to be buzzing with talk about the time when Lee's dog got stolen, and the look on Benny's face when he realized that Esther was wearing a wig. In no time at all every single character had been discussed, as well as half the storylines.

"I'm so glad Lee's in it more now," one girl said, and everyone agreed.

Georgie wagged a finger in the air. "Funniest person in the show," she declared firmly. "My ambition is to be as good at acting as she is."

It was so weird hearing all this talk about Mum and the other actors, who I'd met loads of times when I'd been on the set during the summer holidays. To everyone here they were just characters from a distant TV world, but to me they were real people. But still, I knew it would be impossible to connect me with Mum because of our different surnames. Mum uses Jamieson as her professional name. My mouth felt dry and my head spun as the chatter went on.

"Are you all right, Katy? You're very quiet," Naomi whispered.

I shook my head as though bringing myself back to earth. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

Naomi must have thought I was feeling homesick because she suddenly mentioned the computer room. "It's great that we can e-mail our families any time, isn't it?"

"Here we go," muttered Georgie, seeing Miss Carol going over to stand by the TV. "Let's hope it's not too much of a lecture."

As it turned out Miss Carol just welcomed us all and went over the daily timetable. The only facts I really took in were supper at six thirty and prep from seven thirty till eight thirty, then free time till bed at nine. Georgie stuck up her hand to ask about the weekends and Miss Carol said that after Saturday morning school finished we were free for the rest of the weekend, though there were often outings and things organized for the different year groups.

"I know it all seems strange and new at the moment," smiled Miss Carol, "but it'll only take a few days for you to feel as though you've been here for ever!" She finished up by saying, "And, girls, you all know where my flat is from the tour. Now remember, if ever anything is worrying you, or if you simply feel like chatting to someone, you mustn't hesitate to come along and see me. Matron will always be in her room on the third floor, and Miss

Fosbrook's room is on the first floor, so you can talk to them too if you want."

"Matron!" Georgie said under her breath. "You're joking."

Fortunately Miss Carol can't have heard. "Any questions?" she asked, smiling round. Then, when no one spoke, she glanced at her watch and said we had forty-five minutes till bedtime.

"Let's watch telly," said Georgie.

But pictures of Buddy kept flashing through my mind. "I think I might go and see my rabbit actually."

"I'll come too," Mia immediately said.

The sun was very low in a beautiful pink sky and everything felt so still and quiet outside after the bustle and noise of Hazeldean. Porgy and Bess whistled and wriggled as Mia cuddled them, while Buddy sat like a warm heavy cushion in my arms. As we put them back in their hutches Mia asked me if I thought I was going to like it at Silver Spires.

I was just going to say "I think so", when my head was flooded with snippets of what people had said earlier on about Mum and *The Fast Lane*. I'd thought I'd be able to simply tell a lie about Mum's job and then get on with my life without any trouble, but now I was realizing that it wasn't quite as easy as that. *The Fast Lane* was on every Friday night, and people would talk about it during the rest of the week too. I'd have to be on my guard the whole time to make sure nothing slipped out that gave my secret away. Was I going to like it at Silver Spires?

"I hope so," I said in a small voice.

## Chapter Four



On Monday evening Naomi and I were sitting at the table in the upstairs common room with Jess, talking about all that had happened during our first proper school day at Silver Spires. Anyone from Year Seven right through to Year Eleven can use either of the common rooms, but most people prefer the main common room on the ground floor. The upstairs one's an L-shaped room and from the other part of the L we could hear the DVD that some older girls were watching as they drank hot chocolate and chatted. Jess was busy drawing a picture of Naomi, while I was leafing through old magazines, studying the fashions.

"Is it nearly done, Jess?" asked Naomi, fidgeting a bit.

Jess frowned and chewed at her thumbnail. "I can't get your eyes right."

Naomi tried to hide a sigh and went back to our conversation. "What was your best bit of the day, Katy?"

"Not sure. Probably...art."

"Art was totally cool!" said Jess. "I can't wait till after-school clubs start. I hope there are loads of arty ones."

"The history teacher's nice, isn't she?" said Naomi, thoughtfully.

I nodded. "I don't think I've done the prep very well, though. It's so weird having fixed times for prep and supper and everything, isn't it?"

"I can't get used to calling it prep instead of homework," said Naomi.

Jess must have decided to give up on her drawing. She pushed it across to Naomi. "It's not much good. I'll try again tomorrow."

"Not much good? It's brilliant!" I squeaked, as Lydia came into the room.

Naomi gasped and slid the picture across the table so Lydia could see it. "Isn't Jess clever?"

Lydia hardly glanced at it. "I'm not that interested in art." Then she reached her hand out to Naomi. "Come and see the e-mail my sister's sent

me. It's so funny."

I got up too because Naomi and I had already decided to e-mail our parents once Jess had finished the picture.

"All the other computers are taken, actually," Lydia said to me.

"I don't mind waiting," I said.

When we got to the computer room, though, there wasn't a soul in sight, which made me wonder whether Lydia had just made it up about the computers all being taken, to try and put me off coming along. It was obvious from the way she always talked directly to Naomi that she wasn't interested in being friends with the rest of us. I told myself that I didn't care, but if I was honest I couldn't help feeling anxious that she might be trying to take Naomi away from our lovely Amethyst team.

I spent the next fifteen minutes typing away as fast as I could, telling Mum and Dad my news...all about my dorm and the names of my dormies, about how nervous I'd felt at the start of every lesson and how anxious I'd felt when I'd gone to the loo between lessons and then got lost in the main building and had to walk into French late. Mam'zelle Clemence hadn't minded at all though. She was just worried about *me* being worried. *We have to call her Mam'zelle, instead of Miss, I wrote, as it's the proper French pronunciation of Mademoiselle. She's my favourite teacher, so far, partly because of her trendy clothes and her lovely jewellery. In fact, she's made me feel inspired to design my own jewellery now, and there's a girl in my dorm called Jess who's going to see if she can actually make a brooch I'm designing, out of shiny paper and stuff from the art room.* I went on to tell Mum and Dad how we're allowed to use the kitchen in Hazeldean for drinks and how cosy the dorm is, how Buddy seems to have settled in, and how odd it felt waking up in a strange room with five girls I was only just getting to know.

Then I really wanted to tell them all about Naomi being a princess and us lot keeping it a secret and how I was still managing to keep my own secret. And I wanted to ask Mum how the filming was going, but Lydia was hovering just behind me and I had the feeling she might be reading over my shoulder, so I decided to save all that for a phone call, and just put, *I hope that everything is going really well in America, Mum, and I can't wait to hear from you soon. Trillions of love, Katy.*

"Can we see what your dorm looks like, Lydia?" Naomi asked.

"It's nothing special, but I can show you my stuff," Lydia replied.

While I was sending the e-mail, my phone bleeped with a message and I saw it said *Mum* on the screen.

*Thinkin bout u on day1! Bet its gr8. Luvu loads. Mum X*

I tapped in my reply as we walked downstairs on our way to see Lydia's dorm. *Just emailed u. Gd so far. Nice dorm n friends. Keepin secret still!*  
*LUL. K X*

There were six beds in Opal but the room looked somehow neater than ours, partly because there weren't any recesses or sloping ceilings so it was a plain rectangle, and partly because everyone's desks were tidier and no one had left any clothes spilling out of half-open drawers, or on the floor. Two girls were on their laptops and another was reading on her bed. They all said hi to us and then carried on with what they were doing. Lydia jerked her head at one of the girls at her desk and mouthed the word "Boring" to Naomi, then pointed to a bed with a bright purple duvet covered in silver roses and pink hearts.

"This is my bed. And look..." She opened a drawer and pulled out a little cellophane bag with a ribbon round the top and flowers all over it. "Six Belgian chocccies!"

"You're not allowed food in the dorms," said the girl who was reading, staring at Lydia with wide, accusing eyes.

"Well the food won't be here much longer!" replied Lydia. She rolled her eyes at Naomi as though it was pathetic to take any notice of rules like that. "Come on, let's go, you two." And as we walked along the corridor towards the big common room she divided the chocolates out between the three of us.

"The girls in my dorm get on my nerves," said Lydia. She turned to Naomi and her eyes gleamed. "I can't wait till I get to swap in with you."

I didn't like this kind of talk. I wanted to keep the Amethyst team together. "All our dormies are really nice," I quickly said.

Then Naomi looked at her watch. "It's ten to nine, you guys. We'd better go and get ready for bed."

Lydia sighed noisily as she stomped off. "It's stupidly early. I never go to bed before eleven at home."

The following afternoon it was athletics. Grace had been counting the minutes since breakfast that morning so it was no surprise that she was

changed and ready before anyone else. “I don’t want to waste a single second,” she said, jogging on the spot and grinning round.

“Someone looks very fit!” said Mrs. Mellor, the PE teacher. “Do you do lots of running, Grace?”

Grace nodded. “I love it. Can I show you something?” We all stopped getting ready to see what she was pulling out of her pocket. “It’s a stopwatch with a built-in speedometer and pedometer *and* milometer so you can check your speed at any time, and also tell how many steps you’ve taken and what distance you’ve run.”

“What a fabulous little gadget!” said Mrs. Mellor. “My stopwatch seems very ordinary compared to that!”

Georgie groaned. “How can you be so keen, Grace?” she said, making her shoulders go all droopy. I noticed that she and Jess had only got as far as taking off their shoes and socks and were sitting on the floor with their legs stretched out, comparing the lengths of their toes. I saw Naomi watching them too and when our eyes met a second later we both cracked up.

Lydia was standing in front of the mirror brushing her hair back but she swung round, holding her ponytail, at the sound of our laughter. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing worth talking about,” I said. “The moment’s gone.”

She let her hair drop and put her hands on her waist. “Tell me anyway.”

I saw Naomi hiding a sigh. “Just Georgie and Jess comparing toes in a world of their own,” she explained.

“*Thank* you,” said Lydia, sounding very prim and proper. She reminded me of a teacher, the way she gave Naomi a nice smile for being the good girl who’d answered her question and flashed me an evil look in the mirror for being the naughty one. I tried not to care, but it was becoming more and more obvious that Lydia didn’t like me, and I suppose that’s because of Naomi and me getting on so well together.

Down on the athletics field the first thing we had to do was run round it twice while Mrs. Mellor timed us. In no time at all Grace had gone ahead of everyone, running like a gazelle. Naomi and Lydia and a few others weren’t far behind, while the rest of us followed in a bit of a bunch.

“Wait for me, you guys,” moaned Georgie, from the back.

Mum and I had been jogging together quite a bit in the summer holidays and I was trying to remember what she’d told me about breathing.

Gradually my legs started to feel stronger and my stride seemed to get longer because I was settling into a rhythm. Ahead of me I could see Lydia beginning to lag behind Naomi and by the time I started the second lap I'd caught up with Lydia. I was about to overtake her when I realized she was completely puffed out and had gone rather red in the face.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah...I’m fine.” She straightened up a bit but I could tell she was struggling. “I’m just...taking my time...on purpose. It’s bad for you...to run too fast...when you haven’t been training...you know.”

It sounded like she was criticizing me but I couldn’t be bothered to tell her I’d been running with Mum. I just kept my eye on Grace, who’d nearly finished the two laps, and on Naomi, who wasn’t that far behind her.

“Come on, Katy!” yelled Naomi from the finishing line a moment later. “You’re doing really well!”

Grace was doing leg stretches but she stopped doing them to watch me running. “Keep it up!” she called, jumping up and down. And that made me put on a spurt.

Then Naomi held her arms out wide and stood there grinning her head off. “Go Katy!”

I went flying into her and we hugged each other, then fell over and laughed our heads off. Mrs. Mellor tutted a bit and rolled her eyes as we got up but I could tell she was pleased with the way we’d both run. After that she was busy ticking off everyone’s names on her chart and writing their timings in for them because there were quite a few girls all finishing at once, including Lydia, who was throwing a disapproving look in my direction.

“I hope you get that grass stain off your shirt okay, Naomi,” she said.

I just ignored her. Nothing was going to spoil my enjoyment of the afternoon.

That evening we talked about what good fun the PE lesson had been. We were in the LC, which is what we’ve started to call the L-shaped common room, and I was trying to design a new PE outfit, because Georgie insisted that the tracksuit we have to wear makes her feel fat, and feeling fat slows her down.

“I’d probably run faster than any of you if I was wearing the right thing,” she said, nearly going cross-eyed as she tried to examine her hair for split

ends.

We all laughed except Lydia, whose eyes were on the door. “Where’s Naomi got to?” she asked no one in particular.

“She’ll be here in a few minutes,” I told her.

Lydia’s eyes flashed at me. “Yes, but where *is* she?”

“I don’t know. She said she wanted to be on her own for a while.”

“Well I’m going to find her. She might be lonely.”

Lydia was really annoying me. I know what it feels like to want to be on your own. “I’m sure she’s okay, honestly.”

And at that moment Naomi walked in.

Lydia jumped up. “Are you all right?”

Naomi nodded and smiled. “I like being on my own sometimes, that’s all.”

“I know what you mean,” said Lydia. “Sometimes it’s good to just get away, isn’t it?”

This time Naomi gave her a really big smile as though she was pleased that Lydia understood.

Then Georgie spoke out and I couldn’t help feeling pleased. “That’s not what you just said, Lydia!”

“I only wanted to check she was okay,” Lydia threw back at her. Then her arm went round Naomi’s shoulder. “Let’s go and look at that website we were talking about.” She guided Naomi towards the door and I got anxious again that she was just trying to take Naomi away from the rest of us. Especially me.

I was more and more convinced that Lydia was only being friendly with Naomi because she was a princess and that Naomi might get hurt if the friendship wasn’t genuine, and I didn’t want that to happen because Naomi’s so nice. I felt as though I’d just eaten a huge meal that weighed me down so I could hardly move.

Only the weight wasn’t food, it was sadness.

## Chapter Five



That first week at Silver Spires went by really quickly, so there was absolutely no time to worry about my secret because of concentrating so hard on making sure I was in the right place at the right time. The teachers were mostly very kind though, and let us off if we turned up late for lessons. It's so easy to get lost at Silver Spires because it's such a vast school with loads of different buildings for all the different subjects. Plus, there's the boarding houses and the sports fields and tennis courts and swimming pool complex. It's like a whole kingdom by itself.

When Friday arrived I suddenly remembered it was *The Fast Lane* in the evening and I couldn't help imagining what it would be like in the common room later with everyone talking about Lee Brook, and I broke into a sweat even though there was no way anyone could possibly guess I had any connection with Cally Jamieson. All I had to do was make sure I didn't blurt out something that would give it away, then everything would be fine.

Mum had told me in an e-mail about the filming of the new opening to the show. She said it was the very last thing to be filmed and the cast had got a bad case of the giggles and hadn't been able to stop laughing, so the director had made them do it again and again. Mum said it was mainly her fault because the more she tried to stop laughing, the more she couldn't. *It wasn't even funny after a while, she'd written, but giggles just kept sprouting out of me, and in the end the director went on filming even though I was laughing my head off and my ribs were aching, because he'd suddenly had the idea that it would work if we kept the laughter in. And it does! Wait till you see it, Kates!*

So now I was worrying that I might laugh too hard, knowing that Mum wasn't acting at all, and Lydia would turn her withering look on me and say, *You are soooo immature, Katy.* I knew that's what she thought of me

because once when Georgie and I had been giggling hysterically at a joke I'd been telling, Lydia had stood there with the straightest face on earth and said it was the kind of joke that her seven-year-old brother told.

After breakfast we all went to see if the list for after-school clubs was up. They were due to start the following week, and personally I was dying to find out if there was a fashion club or anything like that.

"Gym club *and* running!" said Grace, jumping up and down. "Whoa! Cool! I'm going to go down to the field after school today and do some training."

"And music, rock climbing, cookery, chess, ballet..." Mia read out.  
"There are so many great clubs!"

"You can even go riding on Saturdays!" said Georgie. "Not that you'd ever catch me on a horse!"

"Art!" added Jess, stabbing the noticeboard. "Cool."

"What clubs are you doing, Naomi?" Lydia asked.

"Er...debating, I think."

"Yes, me too," said Lydia quickly.

Unfortunately there wasn't anything like a fashion club for Year Sevens, so I wasn't sure what to go for, but Mia decided on music club.

"Drama! Brill!" said Georgie. "Although really there ought to be a chill club," she went on, "where you can just sit about and chill."

And all through the day she kept on bringing it up.

"Don't you think we're overworked at this place?" she said after double maths. "My idea for a chill club would definitely catch on."

"You ought to suggest it, Georgie," I told her, laughing.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "You are *sooo* immature, you two."

"What about running club?" Naomi asked me. "I'll do it if you will. We're both about the same standard, aren't we?"

"But what if all the fastest runners in the school turn up?" I said, with a shiver. "I don't want to feel totally unfit."

"Don't be silly! You're really good," said Naomi. "But seriously, we could go down after school with Grace and get some practice in."

So that's what we decided to do, and the moment the quarter to four bell went, Grace, Naomi and I raced over to the changing rooms.

"I'll time us all," said Grace, pulling out her stopwatch when we were down on the athletics field. "If we all set off exactly together we can see how long we take."

“And see if we can beat it next time,” added Naomi.

Of course Grace was the fastest, but I was quite pleased that Naomi and I stayed together all the way round so we made exactly the same time.

“That’s because you’ve got the same stride and the same style of running as each other,” said Grace, sounding very knowledgeable. “You’re pacing each other, you see.”

After that we took turns to clip the stopwatch onto our tracksuit bottoms so we could see how the pedometer worked.

“It’s really brilliant, Grace,” I told her, and she looked suddenly sad.

“It’s one of my most precious possessions... My great-granny bought it for my birthday before she died.”

“How lovely that you’ve got this memory of her,” Naomi said straight away, coming out with exactly the right words to make Grace feel better. That’s what I like about Naomi, she seems very wise, but it doesn’t stop her being good fun.

At supper Lydia marched up to me in the queue and asked where Naomi was.

“She’s just gone to the loo.”

Lydia put her hands on her hips. “So where did you two get to after school?”

“We wanted to get in training for running club.”

“Well thanks for telling *me*! I was looking everywhere for Naomi.” Lydia looked for a second as though she was going to explode, but then she tipped her head to one side and smiled sweetly because Naomi had appeared.

“You didn’t tell me you were doing running club.”

Naomi shrugged. “I like running,” she said simply. “And it was fun trying out Grace’s pedometer.”

“It sounds really clever, Grace,” said Mia. “Why don’t we see how many steps we take in one day?” she went on excitedly. “I read that you’re supposed to take ten thousand to keep fit.”

“That’s loads!” squealed Georgie. “I’d be dead if I did that many.” Then she suddenly looked excited and turned to Grace with praying hands. “All the same, bags I wear it!”

Grace laughed and I wondered if she’d mind Georgie wearing it all day, now I knew how precious it was to her. She didn’t have to make a decision then and there though, because typically Georgie had already changed the subject.

"I wish it would hurry up and be prep!" she said.

We all stared at her. "Turning into a bit of a geek, George?" laughed Jess.

Georgie rolled her eyes at Jess. "Work it out! The sooner we get started on prep, the sooner we finish, and the sooner we get to watch you-know-what!"

"*The Fast Lane!* Yay!" said Mia. "I'd forgotten about that."

My heart skipped a beat. *I'd* managed to forget it too, but instantly my mind filled up with emotion and little bursts of nervousness kept on hitting me all through prep.

Afterwards we gathered in the main common room and when Miss Carol came into the room and saw how many girls were wanting to watch *The Fast Lane*, she said that the Year Tens and Elevens could watch it in her flat as she was planning on watching it herself. Miss Fosbrook came and sat with us though and everyone immediately started talking to her because she's so friendly and easy to talk to. She's not really like a teacher at all.

"I didn't know you liked *The Fast Lane*, Miss Fosbrook."

"Oh yes, I'm a big fan! In fact I've got the DVD of the first series in my room."

Georgie was sitting quietly for once, glued to the adverts, but then she flicked her eyes over to Mia. I think she was checking that Mia was okay as she'd been homesick at night quite a few times lately. Georgie's such a sweet person, even if she is a bit mad. She's always the one to give Mia hugs and brighten her up.

And that was the thought I was having when she suddenly shushed everyone in the common room very dramatically. "Silence in court! It's on! It's on! *The Fast Lane* is about to begin!"

My heart started pounding and I wished I wasn't sitting wedged in between Naomi and Georgie because surely they'd feel how tense I was. And of course that thought made me even tenser. Then the music started and the very first picture was a close-up of Mum laughing hysterically, and the whole common room burst out laughing and didn't stop all through the opening, it was so funny. I didn't have to worry about the little tears of pride that pricked the corners of my eyes, because no one was paying any attention to me at all and even if they had been, they'd just think I was crying with laughter.

Once the opening sequences stopped and the actual story began there was no sound in the common room apart from explosions of laughter erupting

all over the place. But I had another shock when I suddenly recognized some of the lines that the characters were saying, and realized that I'd actually tested Mum on parts of this programme during the summer holidays. That made me hot and tense, so it was quite a relief when it came to the adverts.

"I'd love to be like Lee," sighed Mia, which started everyone else off saying who their favourite character was.

"But Lee's definitely the best actress," said Georgie, which made me feel really proud of Mum. "She's just so totally believable. Can we borrow your DVD tomorrow afternoon, Miss Fosbrook?"

"There's a shopping trip tomorrow afternoon, remember," Lydia cut in. "Why don't you just *buy* the DVD?" she asked in her loud voice. She was looking at Georgie as if to say, *How can you not have worked that out?*

"Because we're not all made of money," Georgie answered.

"They only cost—" began Lydia, but she was interrupted by a huge "Ssshhhhh!" from just about everyone in the room as *The Fast Lane* was back on again.

The second half was even better than the first half and I got so wrapped up with the storyline that I actually managed to relax. After it had finished, while everyone was chatting excitedly, I went off to text Mum.

*U were brill! Big hit at SS! Miss u. Luv u K X*

And the reply came back almost immediately.

*Bet ure the only girl at SS who gets to see her Mum once a week! Love you. X*

I was smiling to myself about that as I went back into the common room. Quite a few girls had gone off to their dorms, but the rest were still buzzing about *The Fast Lane* and Georgie told me she was planning on saving up for the DVD.

"Well I'm going to get it tomorrow," said Lydia, "and if you're really good I'll let you watch it with me!"

"Yay!" said Georgie, waltzing Mia round the common room. "Just think, only Saturday morning school to get through, then lovely shopping and freedom right till Monday morning. Brilliant!"

Naomi suddenly looked really fed up. She beckoned us all to come closer and spoke in a whisper. "My parents have arranged for me to do an interview for a magazine on Saturday afternoon, so I can't come on the shopping trip. I tell you, I'm furious with them."

“Oh, you’re so famous, Naomi!” hissed Georgie.

“Shh!” I quickly said.

Georgie glanced round. “No one heard.”

“Is it at school?” asked Mia.

Naomi nodded. “In Miss Carol’s flat. That’s the trouble. Mum and Dad just don’t realize how important it is to me that no one finds out I’m a princess.”

“What’s the magazine?” asked Lydia.

“It’s called *Family*, so it’s not one that anyone here is likely to read, thank goodness.”

“Will they take photos?” asked Georgie, her eyes getting bigger by the second.

“S’pose so. They usually do,” said Naomi, looking more fed up than ever. “I just wish I wasn’t missing the shopping trip, but the interview was arranged ages ago so I’ve absolutely got to do it.”

Lydia put her arm round Naomi. “Don’t worry, I’ll stay behind so you’re not all on your own. I can get the DVD next week.”

“That’s really nice of you, Lydia, but you don’t have to, honestly. It’ll be boring for you.”

“It’s okay, really. I’ll just sit in the corner and be as quiet as a mouse...” She put on a naughty smile. “...unless they want any photos of Princess Naomi’s friend!”

“Oh yes!” squeaked Georgie. “Group picture! Group picture! We’ll all be in it!”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “No way! People might start asking questions about why you’re not going shopping, when you’ve been on about it all week.”

“One friend would be okay, though, wouldn’t it?” said Lydia, looking very serious now.

I could see Naomi hesitating. “Well...”

Lydia grabbed her hand excitedly. “Let’s ask!”

“No, sorry,” said Naomi firmly. “I really want to keep it quiet. I’ll just do it on my own.”

Miss Fosbrook suddenly appeared and everyone looked over, so I think I was the only one who noticed the sour look on Lydia’s face.

Later, when I was cleaning my teeth with Naomi, she suddenly did a huge sigh and spoke to me in the mirror. “If I was going to have *anyone* in a magazine photo with me, I’d have chosen you, Katy...”

I felt so happy at that moment. “Thank you, Naomi! That’s really cool.”

“To tell you the truth,” she went on thoughtfully, “I don’t know what to think about Lydia. Sometimes she’s really nice and friendly, like she was just then, offering to stay back from the shopping trip to keep me company, but then I wonder whether it’s just so she can have her photo taken with me.”

I thought about the way Lydia is only ever nice to Naomi and isn’t interested in being friends with the rest of us at all, and I felt like blurting out, *I’m sure it’s only because you’re a princess*, but I managed to stop myself. It might have been hurtful to Naomi to hear someone actually saying what she was suspecting. So instead, I put my arm round her and told her I’d bring her a surprise back from the shopping trip.

“Hey, cool! I love surprises!”

*And that’s another thing I’ve got in common with Naomi*, I thought to myself as I lay snuggled up in bed that night, planning what to get her.

## Chapter Six



I was so excited about going shopping – all those lovely new clothes shops to see. But it felt a bit weird going in a minibus. There were two school buses, because so many Year Sevens wanted to join the shopping trip. The older girls were allowed to catch the bus on their own and I was looking forward to when that would be me. Miss Fosbrook came in our minibus with the housemistress from Oakley, Miss Bromley. They sat at the front near the driver and chatted all the way into town, apart from turning round occasionally to tell everyone to quieten down. Georgie, Mia and Grace were right at the back, and Lydia was somewhere in the middle, but Jess and I were only just behind the housemistresses. We were probably the only quiet ones on the bus, because I was concentrating on trying to draw a pair of shoes and Jess was watching.

“You’re really good at art, Katy,” she said after a while.

“No I’m not. I can only draw clothes and shoes! And on this bumpy ride I can hardly draw anything!”

Then we both clearly heard Miss Fosbrook say to Miss Bromley, “They’ve been caged up all week, it’s no wonder they’re going a bit berserk!”

“Caged up?” said Jess quietly to me. “Anyone’d think we were animals! Can I borrow a page of your sketchbook? I want to try something out.”

“Who’s that girl sitting on her own staring out of the window?” I heard Miss Bromley asking quietly. “She doesn’t look very happy.”

Miss Fosbrook turned round. “That’s Lydia Palmer.” She lowered her voice. “Miss Carol had some visitors this afternoon and I saw Lydia talking to one of them. She was all smiles at first but then she turned scowly and now she’s just plain sulking. I don’t know *what* that’s about!”

Jess looked at me wide-eyed and whispered, “Do you think Lydia actually went and talked to the magazine people, even after what Naomi said last night about wanting to do the interview on her own?”

I nodded, thinking that would explain why Lydia had gone rushing off after lunch.

“I knew she was lying about wanting to do her hair when she had loads of time to get ready for the shopping trip,” hissed Jess. She dropped her voice. “Hey, do you think she had the cheek to ask to be in the photo with Naomi?”

I shook my head. “No. That would have made Naomi mad.”

“So why was she looking scowly then?”

I shrugged. “Maybe the magazine people were too busy to talk and told Lydia to go away or something.”

Jess nodded and we fell silent for the rest of the journey. When we got to the town centre Miss Fosbrook shushed us all and explained the rules.

“Now, girls, you need to show me that you can behave responsibly and sensibly. We’ll meet up here in an hour and a half by the fountain. Make sure you always stay with at least one other person, and phone me if you have any problems.” Then she smiled, and added, “And don’t spend too much money. This is only the first weekend of term, remember!”

Two minutes later I was in a shoe shop, trying on the best pair of shoes ever.

“They’re totally fab, Katy!” said Georgie. “Why don’t you buy them?”

“No way. I’m not blowing my allowance on a pair of shoes!” I told her.

“You don’t even know how much they cost,” she said, bending down and lifting up my right foot, which made me lose my balance so I had to hop a bit. “Stand still, for goodness’ sake, Katy!”

“I’m trying!” I laughed.

“Stop being so immature, you two,” said Lydia, picking up an identical shoe off the display. “Fifty-nine pounds ninety-nine.”

Georgie let my foot drop. “Ridiculous!”

“Well that settles it,” I said, taking the shoe off. “It’s far too much.”

Lydia pulled a face. “Surely your parents would give you an extension to your allowance?”

“No, they’d tell me off for wasting money on something I didn’t really need.”

“That’s exactly what *my* parents would say,” said Georgie. “Come on, folks! Clothes shops next. Where shall we start? Topshop?”

But I’d spotted a charity shop on the other side of the precinct. “That’s where I’m going,” I said, pointing.

“Why?” asked Lydia.

“It’s good fun seeing if there are any bargains,” I explained.

I heard Lydia say “Weird” under her breath, and when the rest of us went in, she stayed outside. I found a beautiful dark-brown scarf with sequins on it that I bought for seventy-five pence, and as soon as we were out of the shop I wrapped it around my hips.

“That looks so cool!” said Jess.

Next we went to the bookshop and I spent ages finding a really good joke book for Naomi. “This’ll cheer her up after missing the shopping trip,” I said, giggling to myself as I read through the jokes on the first page.

Georgie got a book for her little sister’s birthday, then we spent ages in the sweet shop where everyone except Grace bought sweets.

“I’m getting this for Naomi,” said Lydia, picking out an enormous box of chocolates. “This is the way to cheer her up. *You’ll* see.”

I couldn’t help feeling annoyed because I was sure she’d only thought of buying a present for Naomi because *I* had.

After that we went to a few more shops. Georgie bought a scrunchie and two hairslides, but Lydia bought three things – the DVD of *The Fast Lane*, a pair of socks with toes in them and a sparkling silver and green scarf.

“I’ll wear this round my hips when I’ve got my shiny black trousers on,” she told us as we left the boutique. “It doesn’t really go with jeans.” She gave me a look, but I couldn’t tell whether the look was saying that I had no taste, for putting my scarf with jeans, or whether it meant that her scarf was better quality than mine so it needed to go with smarter trousers. I sighed to myself, wishing that Naomi could have heard what Lydia just said, so she’d realize that she’s not actually a very nice girl. But somehow, Lydia never makes comments like that in front of Naomi.

“Haven’t you spent rather a lot?” Jess asked Lydia, once we’d bagged the best table at the coffee shop and were sitting round it on the squishiest sofas ever.

“My parents said they’ll send me more money whenever I need it,” Lydia explained. “They just want me to be happy.”

“You lucky thing,” said Georgie. “Are your parents really rich then, Lydia?”

“Yes, they both earn loads.”

“My dad earns quite a lot,” said Georgie, “but Mum only works part-time. I think it’s taken all their money to pay for me to come to Silver Spires. They were hoping I might get a scholarship but we can’t all be gifted like Mia.”

“What, so you got a scholarship?” Jess asked Mia.

Mia went pink and looked down. “Only a music scholarship, not an academic one.”

Georgie put her arm round her. “You see, she’s modest as well as gifted. Which is something else I’ll never be, by the way.”

“But you are the *wittiest* person here,” I pointed out, and Georgie went all theatrical and blew me a kiss across the table as everyone laughed. “Well, thank you, Katy!”

“What about *your* parents, Grace?” asked Georgie. “I suppose they must be pretty rich sending you to a school in England when you come from Thailand.”

Grace looked embarrassed. “Well...er...actually... I got a sports scholarship.”

Georgie groaned. “Why is everyone so talented? It’s not fair!”

“Well Naomi and I aren’t particularly talented,” said Lydia. “We’re just lucky because we’re...” She faded off and flicked her eyes round the room as though she’d suddenly let out a secret by mistake.

“Well, come on,” said Jess. “We all know that Naomi’s a princess. What are you?”

I must admit I was feeling curious myself.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Lydia, with a kind of secretive smile.

“Let me guess,” said Georgie. “A countess? A dukess?”

“Duchess!” we all corrected her.

“No, nothing like that,” said Lydia. “It’s just that...I’ve only ever talked to Naomi about this before because she understands...but my parents own a massive advertising company. Everyone’s heard of it in America. So Mum and Dad are really well known over there. We’ve lived in the States for years.”

Georgie leaned forwards, wide-eyed. “You mean they’re famous? Do people, like, recognize them?”

Lydia nodded and smiled round at us. “It’s no big deal, but now you see why I get on with Naomi so well. I mean, I’ve had to do interviews and stuff in America as well...”

I saw a look of irritation flash across Jess’s face. “Well, I’m nothing special because I didn’t get a scholarship and neither of my parents are famous. In fact they’re both accountants, which everyone says is the most boring job in the whole world!”

My heart pounded because my moment had come and I knew I had to collect my words and tuck them in quickly underneath Jess’s so as not to draw attention to myself. “Well my dad produces documentaries for videos, and...” I braced myself for the lie. “...My mum’s a set stylist, which is—”

“It’s when you have to arrange a room in a certain way so it can be photographed for magazines and things,” interrupted Lydia. “I know that because Mum often employs stylists to work for her.” Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Hey, wouldn’t it be funny if my mother had ever employed yours!”

Lydia always had to be the most important person, but it was annoying me more than ever now that she was making out her mum was better than mine. I couldn’t reply, though, even if I’d known what to say, because Georgie was making loud noises with her straw, sucking up the very last bits of her mocha smoothie. We all had to tell her to be quiet because people were looking.

“Well I think it must be cool to be a set stylist,” said Mia. “That’s probably why you’re so good at art, Katy. You get it from your mum.”

It was a sweet thing to say but it wasn’t true. “Jess is loads better than me.” Then I remembered something. “Hey, can we look at the drawing you did on the bus, Jess?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not finished...”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Grace, leaning forwards.

Jess pulled the page from my sketchbook out of her bag and laid it on the table, and the hairs on my arms stood up. She’d drawn a cage at a zoo with animals squashed up tight inside it, but you couldn’t really tell what kind of animals they were because they were all standing up on their hind legs and their heads were pressed together so you couldn’t see their faces.

“I don’t get what it is,” said Lydia.

“Is it at a zoo?” asked Georgie.

“Jess and I heard Miss Fosbrook saying to Miss Bromley that we were only being a bit loud on the bus because we’d been caged up all week,” I

explained. "It's really brilliant, Jess," I added.

"Are they supposed to be animals or people?" asked Lydia.

"It doesn't matter what they are," said Grace, picking the picture up slowly and staring at it with big eyes. "It's just a feeling about being caged up."

Jess's whole face lit up at those words and she asked Georgie to swap places with her so she could sit next to Grace, so while the rest of us finished up our drinks those two were deep in conversation together.

"Let's go," said Georgie, looking at her watch. "I want to zip to that new gift shop we spotted before we have to be at the fountain. Come on, Mamma Mia!"

In the minibus on the way back I sat next to Lydia because Jess was with Grace. I was working on my shoe designs while Lydia was busy texting away.

She glanced over with a bored look on her face at one point. "You're obsessed with drawing shoes." Then her phone bleeped and she scanned the screen quickly. "Text from Naomi. She finished her interview ages ago and now she's exploring the school."

A moment later I got a text too. All it said was *Cant w8 2cu. Sthing bads happened. Nao x*

"Who's it from?" Lydia asked, trying to peer over my shoulder.

I quickly deleted it. "Same message as yours," I said, thinking fast. "Naomi must have sent it to both of us at the same time."

Then, as Lydia buried herself in yet more texts, I looked out of the window. It had started to rain and the greyness made me go into a daydream all the way back, wondering whatever could have happened to Naomi. I was expecting to see her the moment I jumped off the minibus, but there was no one in sight at Hazeldean.

"I'm going to find Naomi," Lydia said, making for the common room.

We all followed and kind of exploded through the door. There were loads of girls in there but no sign of Naomi.

"Have any of you seen Naomi?" asked Lydia.

"No, but guess *what!*" said a girl called Steph, eyes sparkling. "She's a princess! It's true, honestly! Naomi Okanta is a princess!"

"What?" I managed to squeak. But I knew I'd heard her all right. I just couldn't believe the news was out.

It came as a bit of a shock when Lydia's voice rang out. "Yeah, we know. Naomi told her close friends ages ago, but we've been keeping it a secret." She turned and looked at the rest of us. "Haven't we?"

Everyone of us nodded dumbly, and I expect we were all thinking the same thing. How had the secret got leaked?

Jess was the one who broached the subject. "So how did you lot find out?" she asked, and I held my breath.

Steph frowned then turned to the girl next to her. "It was *you* who told me. How did you find out?"

The girl shrugged. "Dunno. Everyone was just saying it down at the pool."

"I'm going to find Naomi," I mumbled, making my way towards the door.

Lydia pushed past me. "Me too."

And we left the others talking loudly, trying to untangle the mystery of exactly who told who. Neither of us said a word as we raced up the three flights of stairs to Amethyst and I pushed open the door. Naomi was lying on her bed. She looked as though she'd been crying and I wanted to give her a tight hug, but somehow Lydia got there first.

"You poor thing," she said, clutching Naomi's hand. "I can't believe the secret's out." She hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Do you know how it happened?"

Naomi shook her head as she sat up. "I just don't get it."

"How long have you been up here on your own?" I asked her quietly.

"Not long. I had a walk around first."

"Well, I'm going to dump my bag in Opal," said Lydia, brightening up all of a sudden. "But first..." She pulled out the box of chocolates with a flourish. "Da-daaaaa! These are for you, Name! I thought they'd cheer you up as you missed the shopping trip."

Naomi's face lost its anxious look for a moment as she took the chocolates and gave Lydia a hug. "Hey, thanks. That's really nice of you." Then she suddenly noticed my new scarf. "That looks nice, Katy? Where did you get it?"

"The Cancer Research shop. I like getting things from charity shops..."

"Me too," said Naomi, "because you save money and you know the money you're spending is going to help someone too."

I nodded hard because that was exactly what I thought, but Lydia stared at Naomi as though she was talking double Dutch, then suddenly she tapped the chocolate box and said, “I would have made it an even bigger one if I’d known you were having such a bad time here.” She practically skipped out of the door. “Back in a sec. Don’t move a muscle!”

As soon as she’d gone Naomi wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like the name, ‘Name’!”

“Why, because it’s not a proper name?” I asked, which set us off giggling.

Then her face clouded over.

“What exactly happened?” I asked her quietly.

She sighed. “Well, I did the interview with a woman journalist and I had my photo taken loads of times by a photographer. Then both the magazine people went, and I chatted with Miss Carol for about five minutes. She was really nice, just asking me how I was settling in and whether I felt that I’d made any good friends and I told her I’d made quite a few and everything was fine. After that, I decided to go over to the library and when I was there some Year Nine girls asked me if it was true that I was a princess, and I asked them how they knew that and they said they’d heard some other girls talking about it, but they didn’t know what year they were in. And then on my way back some Year Eights started asking me how it felt having a king for a dad and things like that. By the time I got back to the common room the whole of Hazeldean seemed to know, so I went to Miss Carol and it was obvious she was totally shocked.”

“What did she say?” I asked.

“She said she was baffled because everyone was at lunch when the magazine people arrived with their cameras and stuff, and there was no one around at all when they were leaving because people were either out shopping or they’d gone swimming or something. So they couldn’t be the reason why everyone knows.”

Suddenly, I knew I had to tell Naomi what I’d heard on the minibus. “Well, on the way into town, I heard Miss Fosbrook telling Miss Bromley that she saw Lydia talking to Miss Carol’s visitors. She said Lydia was being all smiley at first but then turned sulky.”

Naomi gasped. “Talking to the magazine people! But I said I wanted to do it on my own, and everyone should carry on as normal.” She sighed again. “She must have talked to them at the end of lunch when she said she

was going to do her hair. But that still doesn't explain how everyone knows my secret, does it?"

I didn't say anything, and I was just trying to work out why Lydia had been in a sulk, when she suddenly appeared in our dorm, looking amazing in her black shiny trousers with the new scarf tied round her hips.

"Lydia, did you—?" began Naomi, but Lydia interrupted her.

"Have you started the choccies yet?"

"No...but—"

"Good, because I was thinking we ought to have a midnight feast in your dorm. If we all sneak something out of the dining hall for the next few meals, we'll have plenty of stuff. And I'll bring my bottle of fizzy passion-fruit juice. I've been saving it for a special occasion, but this *is* special, isn't it, because we've got to cheer you up, Name!"

After that, Naomi mustn't have felt like confronting Lydia about talking to the magazine people. It might have seemed a bit mean when Lydia was being so nice. And for the rest of the day whenever people clustered round asking Naomi what it was like being a princess, Lydia was right there, practically glued to her side, shooing people away and telling them Naomi simply wanted to be left in peace. "Look, just leave her alone. It's really annoying having people going on and on about it when you're well known." And then of course everyone wanted to know how Lydia knew what it was like to be well known, so out came the story about her parents being famous in America. She was really showing off, but it was true that she was getting the attention away from Naomi at the same time, which Naomi seemed quite relieved about. She kept on flashing Lydia grateful smiles.

The rain didn't stop until supper time, and the more the day got greyer and greyer, the more my spirits sank. Lydia was telling Naomi about the shopping trip, but they were too far away for me to join in. I sat at the end of the table poking at my food, while Grace and Jess were taking photos of each other on their mobiles on one side of me, and Georgie was comforting Mia on the other side, because Mia's piano practice hadn't gone very well.

Then an older girl passed our table and I saw her jerk her head at Lydia and Naomi and say to her friend, "Birds of a feather flock together, eh?" I'd heard that saying before. It meant it was no wonder Lydia and Naomi hung out together, because they had a lot in common.

That was when I felt a horrible anxiety creeping slowly up on me. I'd only been at Silver Spires one week but already a pattern was emerging.

Georgie and Mia.

Grace and Jess.

Naomi and Lydia.

I shivered. Where did that leave me?

## Chapter Seven



Hazeldean was suddenly very popular. It didn't matter what day of the week it was, there were always Year Seven and Eight girls from other boarding houses hanging around. It was obvious they were just looking for Naomi, but they were usually disappointed because she was so rarely there. I was never sure where she'd slipped off to, and I didn't ask her. Georgie and Lydia did though, and Naomi would answer vaguely that she'd just been "around".

Lydia would stand in the hall with a crowd of people round her and act like a teacher explaining to a bunch of little kids that Naomi was perfectly normal – just like any of them – all the time she was at Silver Spires. It was only at home that she had servants bowing to her and people flocking round and taking her photo and so on. Then she'd look all coy and add that that was something you just got used to. I couldn't imagine that Lydia had servants who bowed to her, because why *would* they? But when I actually asked her that question she snapped at me that I'd never understand because it was way off anything I'd ever been used to. I'd had to bite my tongue to stop myself coming back with a couple of facts about exactly what I *was* used to. Lydia just loved all the attention though, and now people were even more interested because they could talk about a princess with a famous best friend.

One time when Naomi had been away for over two hours, she came back to find Hazeldean nice and quiet.

"You'll be pleased to know I've got rid of all your fans!" said Lydia.

Naomi gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks, Lydia. It's really kind of you."

"That's okay," Lydia replied, linking her arm through Naomi's. "All this fuss'll soon die down, you'll see."

I went to bed feeling quite miserable again that night, worrying that I was getting pushed away from Naomi. But the next day I opened my eyes to find the dorm lit up with bright golden sunlight that slanted through the curtains and cast moving shadows on the walls and the floor. Immediately my spirits lifted, and I made a resolution to stop getting obsessed about being left out of friendships.

Naomi opened her eyes as I was having that thought and turned straight to me.

I grinned at her. “Isn’t it lovely and bright?”

She nodded and stretched, then looked suddenly happy. “Debating club today! Great!”

“You must be out of your tree,” said a drowsy voice.

“Go back to sleep, George!” I laughed. But I had to agree with her, it wasn’t my first choice of clubs either. “I might go exploring,” I went on, feeling excited because there were lots of parts of the school I hadn’t seen yet. Then I thought of something even better. “Grace, can I borrow your stopwatch after school? I want to see what distance it is from one end of the school grounds to the other.”

Naomi sat up suddenly. “I’ll take you on a guided tour! I know every bit of the school grounds now!” Then she pulled a face. “Oh...but I’ve got debating club...”

By morning break she’d decided to give debating club a miss and come round with me instead. “There’s one place I’m dying to show you,” she whispered. “My secret place.”

It was French after break but I couldn’t concentrate properly because I kept thinking about exploring with Naomi and seeing her secret place. Then roughly halfway through the lesson we were reading a passage about the Paris fashion show, and I suddenly had a massive urge to draw a jacket with lots of intricate detail. I thought I’d be able to listen to Mam’zelle Clemence at the same time if I kept the sketchbook on my lap and only added a bit to the design when I was certain she wasn’t looking, but I made the mistake of thinking she was tied up helping someone at the front, and didn’t notice her coming over to my table until it was too late. Mam’zelle Clemence pointed to the book in my lap and went mad.

“What is zat, Kateeee!” she demanded loudly.

I handed it over with a bit of a red face, feeling everyone’s eyes on me. Her face was screwed up in a disapproving frown but then, miraculously,

the frown began to melt and she nodded slowly. “Hmmm, nice drawing. Did you copy zees?”

I shook my head. “No...it’s my own...”

“Hmm. I like eet.” Then her frown came back as she dropped the book on my table. “Howeverrr, eeet is not to rrree-appear in ze French lesson, hmmm?”

The others thought Mam’zelle Clemence sounded so funny that they kept on imitating her all through the day, especially Georgie. “Hmmm, I like eet. Deed you copy eet?” Naomi joined in as much as the rest of us at first, but by lunchtime she seemed too fed up to bother because she was being pestered again by people wanting to talk to a princess.

It was when we’d finished our first course that she suddenly surprised me by turning to Lydia and blurting out, “Did you talk to the magazine people that day I had my interview, Lydia?”

There was an awkward silence. Georgie stopped like a statue with an open mouth and a forkful of food about to go in it. Jess and Grace broke off their conversation to listen.

Lydia tossed her head. “No, course I didn’t. And even if I did, what difference would that have made?”

“Well, Miss Fosbrook said you did,” I couldn’t help myself saying.

A second later I felt myself shrinking under Lydia’s cold gaze. “Look, all I did was answer when the photographer spoke to me. Terribly sorry, Katy, but I didn’t realize that was against the law,” she said sarcastically. I felt myself blushing as she shut her eyes slowly then opened them and carried on in an over-the-top patient voice. “Miss Carol’s door was open. The photographer saw me passing and asked me if lunch had finished and I said it was just finishing and that Naomi would be along in a moment. He also asked me if Naomi was a friend of mine and I said that she was. Anything wrong with that, Katy?”

I shook my head and felt a fool.

“I’m only trying to find out how everyone found out about me,” said Naomi quietly, “and I wondered if you might have said the word ‘princess’ by mistake and someone might have heard.”

“Well, I didn’t!” snapped Lydia. Then she leaned in closer to Naomi. “I’d be the last person to give your secret away,” she smiled. “Surely you know that by now.”

I was probably the only one who saw the nasty look Lydia flung at me as she straightened up and calmly carried on eating.

At the end of school Grace gave me and Naomi her stopwatch and we headed straight for the sixth-form block, which was 848 steps away. Then Naomi took me on a path that went behind some trees and we came out at the other side of the athletics track, which was where she suddenly clapped her hand to her mouth and said, “Oh no! I forgot to tell Lydia I wasn’t going to debating club. She’ll wonder where I’ve got to!” A shadow crossed Naomi’s face, then she shrugged and mumbled, “Oh well, never mind.”

There was no one at all on the athletics track and it looked so tempting that we decided to run round it.

“Hang on a sec!” I said taking my jumper off. “I’ve got a better idea. Let’s do it three-legged!”

Naomi giggled as I tied my jumper round our ankles. “The pedometer will probably have a heart attack!”

We set off far too fast and fell in a heap laughing our heads off, and that’s when I heard the dreaded voice and looked up to see Lydia standing over us, pulling a face as though she’d just come across a pile of dog’s pooh. “What *are* you doing?” She was looking at me and sneering, but then she spoke to Naomi in a lighter voice. “Where did you get to? I thought we were supposed to be doing debating club.”

“I know...sorry,” Naomi replied, scrambling to her feet, which wasn’t easy with one of her ankles tied to mine. “I forgot to tell you I...changed my mind.”

Lydia turned her gaze on me and I saw real jealousy in her eyes, which made me shiver it was so strong, but she recovered quickly and smiled at Naomi. “Actually I’m fed up with debating club so I’ve signed us both up for rock climbing next week.”

“Oh no! I’m not very good with heights!” said Naomi.

“You’ll be okay. And anyway, I can help you,” said Lydia, linking her arm through Naomi’s as we all started walking back to Hazeldean.

I felt my spirits sinking, but I remembered my resolution not to let Lydia bother me. I just wished nothing had interrupted my lovely time joking around with Naomi. Now I wouldn’t even get to see her secret place.

“Pity you can’t wear Grace’s pedometer when you’re climbing,” I laughed, trying to keep our fun alive for a bit longer. “Maybe it would tell

you how high you've gone!"

Naomi grinned at me but Lydia rolled her eyes.

"That's stupid. Of course it wouldn't. You'd just end up breaking it," she said.

"Well anyway, I think it's brilliant. I'm going to ask for one for Christmas and get in some training at home. Then, when I come back after the holidays I'll be even fitter than Grace!"

"Like *that* would happen," said Lydia under her breath. She was looking at me as though I'd announced I was going to get a crown so I'd be just like Naomi.

"I was only joking," I told her a bit snappily. "I'm not that keen on running. I much prefer fashion design."

"Oh yes," said Lydia, very bright all of a sudden. "That reminds me, I came across Mam'zelle Clemence, and she wants you to go and see her about starting a fashion club."

"A fashion club! Great!"

"She lives at Oakley. She said she'd be on duty all evening."

I was surprised that Lydia was being so helpful all of a sudden, but pleased too, and I couldn't wait to talk to Mam'zelle Clemence.

Miss Fosbrook let us out of prep really early because for once everyone had found it quite easy, so I went straight over to Oakley. I asked someone where Mam'zelle Clemence was, but it turned out that it was her evening off, so there was nothing I could do but go back to Hazeldean, wondering crossly whether Lydia had deliberately lied to me or Mam'zelle Clemence had just forgotten she wasn't on duty that evening.

When I found my friends in the LC, they were sitting around the table playing cards.

"What did Mam'zelle Clemence say?" asked Naomi as soon as she saw me.

"She wasn't there. I guess I'll see her tomorrow."

"Oh right." Naomi looked surprised. "Anyway, come and join in."

"She can't. It's for pairs," Lydia pointed out.

My thoughts were racing. Perhaps I was getting paranoid, but I couldn't help wondering whether this was Lydia's latest way of making sure I was excluded from the group.

"It's okay, I'll watch," I quickly said. "What do you have to do?"

“We’ve all invented a secret signal with our partner,” Jess explained. “You have to keep swapping your cards in until you get four that are all the same and then give your partner the secret signal without anyone detecting it...”

I watched them playing for about ten minutes, then Naomi insisted that I join in. “You can be Lydia’s partner,” she said. “I don’t mind watching, honestly.”

“But then Katy will know our signal,” said Lydia.

“You could invent a new one,” Jess suggested.

But Lydia seemed to have other plans. “Or,” she said dramatically, “we could watch my DVD of *The Fast Lane!*”

“Yay!” said Georgie. “Good thinking!” And she leaped up from the table.

Some other Year Sevens were in the middle of watching a programme on telly. They said we’d have to wait till it was finished, but when they saw that Naomi was one of the people wanting to watch the DVD they instantly changed their minds and all patted the seats next to them, grinning at Naomi and encouraging her to sit down.

“Leave her alone,” said Lydia. “She’s sitting with me.” Then she flopped back into the biggest beanbag and pulled Naomi down with her.

The episode we watched was the earliest one of all, so Mum wasn’t in it till over halfway through because this was when she was new to the show. As soon as she came on I was filled with the memory of the first time she’d had to go to America. I was eight and I’d been staying with my grandparents because Dad was away too, and I could clearly remember how my granddad had been ill and I’d not been allowed to make any noise around the house. The whole place had seemed really sad and still, and I’d felt lonely because Grandma was too busy looking after Granddad to bother with me.

After the programme finished I couldn’t stop thinking about it all and I was desperate to talk to Mum. I tried and tried to get through on the phone but wasn’t having any luck. I was standing at the end of the first-floor corridor because it’s very private just there and the reception is good. It was dark and stormy outside and the rain was beating against the window. I could hear rumbles of thunder too, which usually makes me feel quite cosy when I’m safely in the warm and dry. But not today. A horrible sadness was gradually seeping its way inside me as I kept going over the programme in

my head and picturing Mum's face, and remembering how lonely I'd been at Grandma's.

If I pressed my nose to the windowpane I could just about make out Pets' Place in the distance. The shed has a corrugated iron roof and the rain must sound like bullets hammering down, to the animals inside. Poor Buddy. I wondered if he was frightened. And as I stood there staring out at the darkening sky an idea began to take root in my mind. What was it Mum had said? *If you ever feel lonely or worried about anything, you can tell Buddy all about it. He'll help you sort it out.* Yes. That's what I'd do. I'd go and see Buddy. But I'd have to be careful because everyone would be getting ready for bed any minute now, and Matron was on duty. I'd be in big trouble if she found me going out at this time. We're not allowed out of the boarding house after eight thirty and the door is locked at nine.

I hurried downstairs and passed Miss Carol at the bottom, so I pretended to be going towards the common room.

"Coming up to bedtime, Katy," she said, looking at her watch.

"I left something in the..."

"Okay, quick as you can." Then she was gone, heading towards her flat.

No one else was in sight so I dashed back through the hall to the front door, and a minute later I was running in the rain, thinking what an idiot I was not to have a coat or umbrella or anything. It was too late for that now, though, so I just went as fast as I could, feeling my legs starting to tremble a bit as I plunged into the heavy, folding darkness. It was such a relief to see the outside light on at Pets' Place. I wasn't sure if someone had left it on by mistake or if it was just a light that stayed on all night, but I was glad anyway and I hurried the last few steps to the door and pushed the handle down.

The feeling of disappointment when I realized the door was locked was too much to bear and I was close to tears when I suddenly remembered Mia mentioning the spare key. So I groped my way along the side of the shed till I came to the window, bent down and slid my fingers under a stone. Bingo! I turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, everyone," I said, switching on the light.

It was lovely to hear all the scuffling noises. I didn't feel so alone any more. Buddy thumped his foot when he saw me and I took him out of his hutch and cuddled him. Sometimes he stays still when he's being held, and

sometimes he doesn't. Today he was in his floppy night-time mood, and nuzzled his nose into my neck, which felt nice.

"Do rabbits feel things like humans do, Buddy?" I whispered into his fur. "I mean, do you miss me when I'm not here? I hope not, for your sake. I wish I was you, then I'd only have to worry about eating and sleeping and I wouldn't care about feeling left out of games or friendships."

Buddy felt so warm and soft, that I told him all about Lydia. "She's determined to be best friends with Naomi, Bud, and I can tell she wishes I'd move to the other end of the planet. Well, maybe not to the other end of the planet but I bet she'd like to be in Amethyst dorm instead of me. I'm not going anywhere, though, because I *like* Naomi and she likes me, so that's that." I stroked Buddy's ears. "Nao's a nice nickname, isn't it? Better than *Name* anyway. I wonder if one day someone here might call me Kates, like Mum and Dad do."

I stayed silent for a moment after that, thinking how ridiculous it was talking to a rabbit, but oddly enough, Mum had been right, it was definitely making me feel better. When I finally put Buddy back in his hutch I noticed there were loads of bits of straw sticking to my top. I brushed them off as best I could, then locked up and started rushing back to Hazeldean through the drizzle. The nearer I got, the more the lights of the building guided me, but I preferred it when it was darker because now I felt as though I was really on show, so I broke into a run and prayed that no one could see me through a window. I also prayed that the front door wouldn't be locked, because nine o'clock is lock-up time.

What if Miss Carol was waiting to pounce on me in the hall and give me a massive telling-off? I breathed a huge sigh of relief when the front door opened, but my heart was still pounding as I looked around in big fear. No one was in the hall, thank goodness, so I didn't waste a second, just raced up the stairs faster than ever before.

"What time do you call this, young lady?" came Matron's stern voice from just behind me as I was going into my dorm. "And why are you all wet?"

"Sorry, Matron. I was looking out of the window and I thought I saw something shiny on the ground, so I went out to get it in case it was important..."

Matron was frowning hard. "And where is it?"

"It was just a silver chocolate wrapper. I've thrown it away."

She nodded. “Well, it wasn’t very sensible, going out in the pouring rain. Go and get ready for bed quickly and if you’re this late again you’ll have early bed the following night.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, hurrying into the dorm.

“Where have you been?” asked Naomi, rushing at me with wide eyes and grabbing my shoulders. “You’re all wet.”

I suddenly felt stupid saying I’d gone to see Buddy. I’d only have to explain why and that might lead to awkward questions, so I told the same lie I’d just told Matron and got changed into my jamas at top speed at the same time.

“What’s this in your hair?” asked Georgie, pulling out a piece of straw. “Are you sure you haven’t been to see Buddy Bunnykins?”

I wished then that I’d told the truth in the first place, but I could hardly go back on it now. “You’re joking! I’d be too scared in the dark!”

Then I whizzed along to the bathroom, with a picture in my head of Naomi’s still face with its anxious, puzzled expression. Had she realized I’d told a lie? No, she couldn’t have done, could she? Maybe I should tell her the truth the next day. But how could I? There’d be too much explaining to do, like why I was suddenly missing Mum so much and what was making me so worried that I needed to go and talk to Buddy at ten-to-nine at night.

No, it was too late now. I was stuck with the lie.

## Chapter Eight



It's funny how things always seem so much better during the day than they do at night-time. The day after my chat with Buddy, Naomi was completely bright and breezy and normal, and I told myself that one little white lie wasn't the end of the world. Then two nice things happened. Firstly, I talked to Mam'zelle Clemence about the fashion design club.

"I came to look for you at Oakley but you weren't there," I began.

"Oh dear. I'm sorrrry you had a wasted journey," she replied, which didn't give me any clues at all about whether Lydia had deliberately sent me on a wild goose chase. "My idea is to link up with one of ze art teachers and form a club together, designing and making jewellery. I'll let you know how I get on, Kateee," she added, "but I'm sure we'll get someseeng off zee ground."

The second good thing was running club, which was brilliant fun. We warmed up in the hall to music, then went down to the track and ran relays. We had to get into pairs and I went with Naomi. Strangely, Lydia didn't seem to mind. She seemed perfectly happy to be Grace's partner. It seemed odd but I was pleased. It would be so great if she'd finally accepted that I was Naomi's friend too.

After running club we all went to get changed and showered. "See you at supper, everyone," said Lydia, as she went off to Opal. "Save me a place if you get there first."

She grinned at us all and I felt a lovely feeling that at last things were looking up.

When Naomi and I went into the dorm after our showers, Grace was on her knees pulling stuff out of her bottom drawer. Her face was white and I could see she was in a state.

"Whatever's the matter?" I asked, crouching down beside her.

"I don't get it..." she said softly. "I just don't get it..."

"What?" Naomi asked, coming over too.

"Before running club I came up here to get my stopwatch but I couldn't find it and there wasn't time to look properly, so I thought I'd have a thorough search later. And I have...and it's not here."

"Where else have you looked?" I asked.

"This is the only place where it could possibly be. I keep all my precious private things in this box right at the back of my drawer."

I caught a glimpse of a red and gold patterned lid, before Grace shut her drawer and sat down heavily, leaning against the wall with her head flopped forwards.

Jess came in a moment later and looked horrified when she heard what had happened. "Just think carefully, Grace. Are you certain you didn't take it to running club?"

Grace sighed. "Double positive." She looked at me. "You and Naomi were the last to use it yesterday."

"But we gave it back to you at supper," I quickly pointed out.

Grace nodded. "I know."

"And are you certain you put it back after that?" asked Jess.

"Well, I was certain, but now I'm wondering if I actually did, because it can't just disappear, can it?"

Jess made Grace have one more careful look all through her drawers, in her bed, on her desk. Everywhere. Then we had to go to supper.

"We'll report it to Miss Carol," said Naomi. "She can give out a notice in assembly, then everyone'll be looking out for it."

"If we miss pudding we'll have time to go to the changing room and look for it before prep," I added.

Naomi nodded. "How about you look in the changing room, Jess, and Katy and I go down the field."

"I'll look on the ground between the dining hall and Hazeldean," said Grace, looking really glum. "I can't imagine that I dropped it though. I always keep it deep in my pocket."

Georgie, Mia and Lydia heard about the missing stopwatch at supper and offered to help with the search. So as soon as we'd wolfed down our lemon chicken we all raced off. Lydia searched the changing-room area. Naomi said she didn't think there was much point in going down to the athletics field after all because we knew perfectly well we'd given the stopwatch

back to Grace, so in the end she and I went into Hazeldean and looked absolutely everywhere.

We were all very subdued at prep because Grace was nearly in tears. “I can easily get another stopwatch,” she said, “it’s just that this one is really precious.”

Jess put her arm round Grace. “I’m sure it’ll turn up somewhere,” she said. “It can’t just disappear.”

“Unless someone’s taken it,” said Grace quietly.

“No one would do that, surely,” said Lydia, and we all agreed, but I had to admit I was getting anxious in case that was what had happened. There just didn’t seem to be any other answer.

After prep I had a nice surprise because Mum called me when we were on our way to tell Miss Carol what had happened.

“See you in the common room,” I said, hanging back to talk with Mum. And of course the first thing I told her about was Grace’s stopwatch going missing.

“Poor girl,” said Mum. “Have the houseparents been notified?”

“The others have gone to tell Miss Carol right now. Do you think someone might have taken it, Mum?”

“Well someone might have found it and decided to keep it, not realizing how precious it is to Grace.”

After that we talked about *The Fast Lane*, and Mum told me how one of the actors was having a baby in real life so they were having to let her character be pregnant too. Then I told Mum about Naomi’s secret being out, which led to a long conversation about my own secret and how relieved I was that I’d managed to keep it so far.

The following morning it was whole-school assembly and the Amethyst girls were extra quiet when it came to the announcements at the end.

“I have something particularly important to report this morning, girls,” Ms. Carmichael began, in her slow careful voice that always reminded me of a world leader speaking. “One of the girls from Hazeldean boarding house has lost a precious possession. It’s a silver stopwatch with all sorts of functions on it, so it is valuable in itself.” She paused. “But it has a greater value too. It was a present from this girl’s great-grandmother who has now died.”

There was a silence after those words. Grace wasn't next to me so I couldn't tell how she was feeling. No one moved a muscle as we waited to hear what was coming next.

"It may be that one of you has come across the stopwatch and not realized its value, in which case you might now be regretting having taken it. If this is the case then all the teachers would be sympathetic. You simply have to hand the stopwatch in and it will be returned to its owner and nothing more will be said."

Ms. Carmichael's eyes seemed to tour round everyone and we held our breath because it was obvious she hadn't finished. When she spoke next, her voice was much quieter and the words came out faster. "However, if the stopwatch has not been returned by the end of the day, I shall have no choice but to ask the houseparents to search the dorms."

There wasn't a sound and yet it was as though the whole school had done an enormous gasp. We have to stay silent till we're out of the hall, but the moment we spilled into the corridor the words came tumbling out as everyone buzzed with conversation about what Ms. Carmichael had just said.

"Do you know whose stopwatch it is?" I heard lots of people asking.

And others were saying that having our dorms searched was like living in a prison.

"You'll definitely get it back now, Grace!" hissed Georgie the moment we were on our own.

"Yes, I don't think anyone's going to search our dorms," said Naomi. "It's just a good way of scaring the person who's taken it."

"Really?" said Lydia. "You think Ms. Carmichael was just saying that?"

"Yes, I agree with Naomi," said Jess. "It's quite clever that, isn't it, Grace?"

Grace didn't look convinced. "If someone really wanted to keep it they could hide it somewhere else."

"Well, let's wait and see what happens today," said Mia. And we all agreed that we'd go back to Hazeldean at morning break to see if there was any news.

Miss Carol was busy on the phone and didn't look too thrilled to see us. "I can understand that you're anxious," she said, when she'd put the phone down a bit impatiently, "but you really need to concentrate on your

schoolwork.” She put her hand on Grace’s shoulder. “As soon as there is any news I’ll be the first to hear about it and I’ll come and find you, Grace.”

So after lunch, even though we were all dying to go back over to Hazeldean, Grace said it was pointless. “I’m going down to the athletics field. Anyone coming?”

“I’m going for a walk,” said Naomi. “Save me a place in history, yeah?”

“Where are you going?” asked Lydia.

“Just around,” said Naomi.

And Lydia didn’t insist on going with her, thank goodness. Maybe she’d finally realized that, princess or not, sometimes Naomi simply liked being on her own.

“Coming to feed the pets?” Mia asked me.

Georgie rolled her eyes and said she’d put up with the stinky animal smell and come along too as she didn’t have anything better to do. Then Lydia surprised me by saying she’d quite like to see Buddy and the guinea pigs.

“I used to have pets when I was little but I grew out of them when I was about eight,” she told us, as Mia got Porgy and Bess out of their hutch.

“Do you want to hold them, Lydia?”

“No thanks. Let’s have a look at Buddy.”

“I’m going to put him in his run. That’s where he grazes,” I explained as I lifted Buddy out. But Lydia didn’t seem interested. She was bending over, poking about at the back of his hutch.

“What are you doing?” asked Georgie. “You’ll get pooh on your hand, you know!”

Then her words froze in the air because Lydia was standing up straight, and on her outstretched palm lay Grace’s stopwatch. My body jolted as though I’d had an electric shock as we all stared at the stopwatch in horror, and my face went white as I felt everyone’s eyes on me.

“What’s this doing in Buddy’s hutch?” Lydia asked me quietly.

I looked at her and in that split second I saw a fleeting look of triumph on her face and guessed exactly what had happened. She’d planted it in the hutch. Lydia had actually sunk so low as to take the stopwatch and make it look as though *I’d* taken it. But how could I say that? Why should anyone believe me? I was trapped. Completely trapped. It was as though the ceiling was caving in. I could hardly breathe. I had to get out.

I thrust Buddy back in his hutch, pushed past Lydia and hurled myself out of Pets' Place. Then I ran towards the athletics track but went straight past it, catching a glimpse of Grace on the way. Tears were streaming down my face, but I kept running and running across the pathway through a copse and along the edge of another field. I was probably out of bounds but I didn't care, and then suddenly I came upon a high hedge and plunged through a narrow archway to find myself in a garden.

"Katy! What's wrong? What's happened?"

I gasped. It was Naomi. She was sitting on a little bench. This must be the secret place she'd been going to show me two days before. The place where she came to get away from everyone. And I'd interrupted her peace.

"I..." But I couldn't speak because of crying. I turned to go and she came after me, turned me round and steered me back towards the bench. I sat down beside her and buried my face in my hands. Her arm went round me and she patted my shoulder and said some words that must have been Ghanaian.

"Sorry," I managed to say, pulling away from her and trying to stop crying. "Have you got a tissue?" She hadn't, so I used my sleeve to wipe my tears, and she kept encouraging me to tell her what had happened.

In the end I just blurted out, "Grace's stopwatch has turned up—"

"But that's great!" Naomi interrupted. "Where?"

"In Buddy's hutch."

There was a silence.

"I don't expect you to believe me, Naomi, but I swear I have no idea how it got there. Well...actually I do have some idea."

Another silence. I was staring at the ground so I couldn't see Naomi's expression, but I could imagine the puzzled look on her face. "How?" she asked eventually.

I took a deep breath. "I think...Lydia planted it there."

Naomi gasped. "But...why would she do that?"

"Because she doesn't like me being friends with you. She's jealous of me." My words were tumbling out, but even as I was saying them I realized they sounded stupid and pathetic. "She wants you for herself. I sometimes think she really hates me...the way she's always putting me down and saying I'm immature and everything. You don't see it, Naomi, because she's always nice with you... But she's so stuck-up and she looks down on me..."

*Another* silence. This was awful. Then Naomi bit her lip. “However... stuck-up she is, I’m sure she’d never do anything as bad as taking Grace’s most treasured possession and planting it on someone, Katy. Have you got any proof...or is it just that you think she’s jealous?”

“Well...no...but...” I looked straight at Naomi for the first time. “You do believe that I didn’t take it, don’t you?”

“I can’t imagine you doing anything like that. Not in a million years.”

“Thank goodness for that, because I’m scared the others aren’t going to believe me...”

“Well, what exactly happened? Tell me the whole story, Katy.”

So I did, starting from Mia saying she was going to feed the pets and the others all coming too, and finishing with me running out of Pets’ Place in tears. Naomi didn’t interrupt me all the way through and at the end she just shook her head sadly and said, “Poor you.” Then she looked at her watch and jumped to her feet. “Oh no, the bell must have gone ages ago. We’d better get back.”

“I can’t go to lessons as though nothing has happened,” I said, feeling panic rising up in me. “No one’ll talk to me. The whole school will probably think I’m a horrible thief by now...”

“Don’t worry. Mia will have told Grace and Grace will have told Miss Carol...”

“And Miss Carol is probably waiting till I turn up so she can tell me what a terrible person I am and keep me in detention every day till the end of term.”

“No she won’t. She’d never do anything like that. But you’d better go and see her straight away. I’ll go to lessons, then I can tell the others that you’re safe.”

“They won’t care. They’ll all hate me,” I said. “Lydia will have made sure of that. And there’s nothing I can do. No way I can prove I’m innocent.” I sat back down heavily. “It’s so unfair.”

Naomi closed her eyes and then opened them very slowly. “All I can say is that my father is a very wise man and I always remember something he said to me when I was eight and I’d told a lie and thought I could get away with it. He said, ‘The truth is the best tool of all, so if it goes missing, don’t make do with any other tool, just wait for the truth to turn up.’”

I was in too much of a state to work out what those words really meant. I just started stumbling back towards school as Naomi ran on ahead of me.

"I'll tell the history teacher you're not well. And I'll make sure the others realize that just because the stopwatch was found in Buddy's cage it doesn't prove anything."

I nodded and watched Naomi rushing off, then two seconds later she came back and gave me a big hug. "Don't tell anyone about this garden, will you? It's my secret place – where I come to be on my own when I get fed up with...the world."

I shook my head.

"Go and see Miss Carol, yeah? She'll tell you what to do."

Then she was gone again and I was left to plod my way slowly back, going over all that Naomi had said. I started by thinking about the moment when I'd asked her straight out if she believed me and she'd said, "*I can't imagine you doing anything like that. Not in a million years.*" At least that was one good thing. I wouldn't be able to bear it if Naomi didn't believe me. But then I frowned and stopped walking as I realized with a jolt that she hadn't actually said she believed me. She'd just said she couldn't imagine me doing anything like that. Was that the same? I wasn't sure. All I knew was that I wished I could wake up and find the whole thing had been a terrible nightmare.

Miss Carol answered the door to her flat as soon as I knocked. She looked serious but not cross. "Come in," she said. "Grace has been to see me with one or two of the others. I understand the stopwatch was found in your rabbit's cage."

I nodded but couldn't speak.

"Sit down, Katy, and try to tell me what happened."

I sighed as I sat down and really had to force myself to speak. "I didn't put it there. I don't know how it got there. I'd never steal anything from anyone."

Miss Carol's eyebrows nearly joined up when she frowned. I found myself staring at them, and then had to quickly look away in case she thought I was being rude.

"If you didn't put it there yourself, have you any idea who might have done?"

I was just about to say Lydia's name when I stopped myself. What was the point? I had no proof that Lydia could have done it. And if I tried to explain what she was like, it would sound stupid. So I just shook my head miserably, then asked her what was going to happen to me.

“Nobody’s blaming you, Katy. Grace is naturally very upset but I’ve asked her to try and be open-minded until we get to the bottom of this.”

“What about Mia and Georgie? Did they come to see you too?”

“Yes, and Lydia.”

I tried not to let anything show on my face. “And what did they say?”

“They mentioned that you ran off in tears...”

“I felt trapped. I had to get out.”

“They didn’t understand why you didn’t defend yourself. I think they felt a bit suspicious about that.”

“Yes, but how could I? I’ve got no proof.” Suddenly I felt furious. This whole thing was so unfair. I stood up and shouted at Miss Carol. “Nobody believes me! It doesn’t make any difference, does it? You can hate me, same as everyone else, because no one can ever find out the truth because I can’t prove it!”

Then I burst into tears all over again and Miss Carol gave me a handful of tissues and tried to hold my hand, but I pulled away.

“Listen, Katy, no one’s going to hate you, because no one is going to find out. I told Grace and the others who came to see me that they must keep completely quiet about the whole thing. And if it comes to my notice that Lydia or anyone from Amethyst has been talking about the matter, they will be in serious trouble.”

“That’ll make them hate me even more. And what about me? What’s going to happen?”

“If you can put your hand on your heart and say that you have no idea how that stopwatch got in your rabbit’s cage, and nothing more comes to light, then I will draw a line under the whole thing and it will be forgotten. A notice will go out telling everyone that the stopwatch has turned up, and that will be the end of the matter. You’d be amazed how quickly things blow over at Silver Spires. Believe me, in a couple of days’ time no one will give it another thought.”

“Except my friends...” I said quietly. “They’ll always wonder.”

“Not if they’re true friends,” said Miss Carol.

I missed history altogether and met the others outside. Jess, Georgie and Mia went on ahead and my heart started beating so hard I thought it would burst out of my body. Grace didn’t look at me at all. Neither did Lydia, but Naomi gave me a nice smile. All I wanted was to get afternoon school over

with so I could go and phone Mum. I'd already decided to tell Mrs. Mellor I wasn't feeling well because I couldn't face running club.

But in the end I couldn't get through to Mum, so I sat at my desk playing CDs and covering pages and pages of my sketchbook with patterns for material. I love trying out different colours together and right now it was the only thing that could help to calm me down. Those words of Naomi's father's, about the truth going missing and how you had to wait for it to turn up, kept on going through my head. But what was the point of waiting? Even if I accused Lydia straight out of planting the stopwatch on me, she'd just deny that she knew anything about it. So how could the truth *ever* turn up?

I was on the next-to-last page of my sketchbook when Georgie came crashing in. "I went to modern dance. It just about killed me but I'm not giving it up because the teacher says you need dance skills to be an actress."

I was totally shocked but really pleased that she was acting completely normally, and I was on the point of saying something about being sorry I'd run off in tears, when she carried on. "Miss Carol says we're not allowed to talk about '*it*', by the way, and the others are all really upset with you, but I believe you." She lowered her voice. "And I've got a pretty good idea who put that stopwatch in Buddy's cage." She mouthed the word "Lydia", and added, "I went and told Miss Carol that too, but she said I couldn't go around accusing people of doing things without an atom of proof."

I could have hugged Georgie. "And what's Lydia been saying herself?"

"Dunno. I'm keeping out of her way." Georgie looked over my shoulder at the pattern I'd done. "Nice. Are you coming to prep, by the way?"

"Yes, course." And as I got my books together I sighed to myself and wondered if Naomi's father had a plan for what to do if the truth was not just missing, but lost for good.

## Chapter Nine



The next two days were horrible because out of my group of friends, only Georgie and Naomi spoke to me, and as far as Georgie was concerned, never when anyone else was around. The others were a bit cool and distant, and Lydia tossed her head and looked in the other direction the moment I appeared. I was totally miserable and wished I could skip the next ten days and go home to Dad for half-term. But I wouldn't be able to enjoy it because of the thought of coming back to Silver Spires hanging over me all the time. It would be best if I could just leave Silver Spires and never come back.

But eventually Miss Carol was proved right. After a while people seemed to forget about the whole stopwatch episode and things started to go back to normal, just like she'd said they would. Nobody discussed it around school any more, and Mia and Jess started talking to me again. Then Grace did too. I can't say they were exactly the friendliest people in the whole world, but at least they were talking. I wished it was because they believed me, though, and not just out of habit.

Naomi didn't act any differently from how she'd acted ever since we'd spoken in the garden, and that was the saddest thing of all, because our lovely friendship seemed to have disappeared for good. We didn't laugh together any more or have fun. I didn't feel close to her like I used to.

Although she was always perfectly nice to me, we'd lost our bond and that made me really depressed and a bit afraid. I would see her mucking about with Lydia, but it was as though I was looking at the two of them through a camera lens that was out of focus. It didn't seem real somehow. And I'd think bitterly to myself that Lydia had got her own way. This was exactly what she'd wanted to happen. Then once or twice I noticed a sad look on

Naomi's face and wondered if she was still thinking about all that had happened and puzzling over why the truth hadn't come out yet.

One lunchtime, we were putting our trays away when she said she'd got something to ask me. We walked towards Hazeldean and eventually she spoke.

"You know that night when you went out in the rain and you were late for bed?"

"Yes..."

"And you know you had straw in your hair?"

I started to feel sick. "Yes."

"And you know how Georgie asked if you'd been to see Buddy, and you said you hadn't?"

The panic I felt was breaking out in an argument inside my head. It was *me* against *me*.

*Don't say you were anywhere near Buddy that night, or she'll definitely think you stole the stopwatch.*

*But I can't lie to Naomi.*

*You'll have to. The truth will only make matters worse.*

*No, the truth is important – the best tool of all, remember?*

*But...*

*Just explain. Go on! NOW!*

"This is going to sound terrible," I began in a small voice, "but I was upset about something to do with Mum and I couldn't tell anyone...except Buddy."

I managed to meet her eyes and all I could see was doubt. Deep, deep layers of doubt. She didn't believe me. And suddenly I couldn't bear the unfairness of it all and I saw red. "Just tell me, Naomi," I said in a horrible voice, "exactly *why* would I want to steal Grace's stopwatch? What possible reason have I got for doing that?"

She looked shocked. "Yes, I know. I kept saying that to myself but then I remembered the straw in your hair and...well, what am I supposed to think?"

I knew my voice was getting louder but I couldn't help it. "Don't you think that Lydia has got every reason under the sun to steal the stopwatch and then pin the blame on me? You *know* she doesn't want you to like me. She wants you all for herself. I don't get why you can't just see that, Naomi."

And that's when I realized Lydia was right behind us. "Katy Parsons! You are such a little sneak thief. You've had it in for me ever since I arrived at this place. But you're the one who borrowed that stopwatch! You're the one who loved it so much you wanted one for Christmas! The problem is *you* can't accept that Naomi might actually want to be friends with someone other than you, and now you're accusing me of taking Grace's stopwatch? But I wouldn't even know where to take it from. I don't know where Grace keeps her stuff. You make me sick!"

She raced off and Naomi instantly went after her, so I was left standing there feeling an idiot and wishing I'd not lost my temper in front of Naomi, because now everything was ten times worse than before. I heaved a sad sigh and knew I had to talk to Mum right now, because this was unbearable. I tapped in her number, then listened to it ring six times before the answerphone message came on.

*"Hi, this is Cally's phone. Leave me a message and I'll get back to you."*

I disconnected and let my mobile drop to my side. Everything seemed worse than ever now. Then I suddenly felt sick as I realized another bad thing. Mum hadn't texted or phoned or e-mailed for three days. Why was that? I knew it was silly, but instantly my mind went to the stopwatch. Had Miss Carol phoned her and told her what had happened? Was Mum so cross that she couldn't even bear to talk to me?

I told myself to stop being so stupid and irrational. Of course Miss Carol wouldn't tell Mum when there was no proof that I'd done anything wrong. And even if she *had* told her, Mum would have been in touch straight away, wouldn't she? But she hadn't been in touch, had she? And then I was back in the middle of my anxiety again because I simply couldn't think of any other explanation. Mum had never left it for three days without phoning before.

I tapped in her number again and this time when the answerphone message came on I spoke in a shaky voice. "*Hi, Mum, it's me. If you've heard from Miss Carol I absolutely swear it's not true. And I...love you loads.*"

All afternoon I felt miserable. Georgie and Mia wanted to know if anything had happened, but I didn't dare to try and explain what Naomi had said to me about the straw in my hair because that would probably get me into even deeper trouble. I just said I was sad because I hadn't heard from Mum in a while.

I kept my mobile on silent during prep, even though they're supposed to be switched off, and used up all my concentration on willing it to ring, which meant I didn't get much geography done. The teacher wouldn't be too pleased, but I didn't care about that because I had much bigger things on my mind.

It was a relief to go up to the dorm and get my sketchbook out, though I didn't know what to draw now. Nothing could inspire me today. It wasn't bedtime for another half-hour but no one seemed to be in the mood for going to the common room. We were all lying on our beds or sitting at our desks, and, as usual these days, Lydia was sitting cross-legged on the big rug with Naomi. It was almost half-term, and what was it Miss Carol said to Lydia on that very first day here? *We stick with the same dorm mates for the first half of term...* I bet Lydia was thinking, *Only two more days to go before I can ask Miss Carol if I can swap dorms with Katy.* Maybe Naomi and Lydia had already been to see Miss Carol. I'd been doodling on the front cover of my sketchbook while I'd been having these thoughts, and when I looked at the doodle I realized it looked like heavy drops of rain falling into a flat pond.

Lydia was leafing through a magazine and looking very excited about something or other.

"We never did have our midnight feast, did we? Let's do it tomorrow, hey?" she said, looking round at everyone except me. "We can all smuggle stuff out of breakfast, lunch and supper, and have a feast! I'll sneak out of my dorm and come up here. No probs."

Surprisingly, no one was particularly enthusiastic. We were all floppy and tired. I sighed as I opened my sketchbook and leafed through the pages of designs. The fashion club hadn't got off the ground yet because Mr. Cary, the art teacher who was supposed to be joining up with Mam'zelle Clemence, was ill, and since the discovery of the stopwatch I hadn't felt like drawing. But I knew I couldn't carry on being in a depressed mood all the time. I had to snap out of it and get on with some jewellery designs. Then, as soon as the art teacher was better and the club was set up I'd be able to start creating my designs.

"What are you designing now, Katy?" asked Georgie, peering down from her bed.

"Earrings."

"Cool! Can you design some for me? Something really crazy!"

“Or something simple and silver for me,” said Naomi.

“Or something little and boring for me,” said Mia, wrinkling her nose.

“You’re not little and boring, Mia,” protested Georgie. “You’re little and sweet! But, tell you what, Katy, if you really want a challenge, try designing something for Grace. I mean, something that she’d actually agree to wear!”

“What a cheek!” said Grace, pretending to be hurt.

It was lovely to hear them all talking so normally to me. I looked carefully at Grace’s face before turning to the last clean page. Inspiration came flooding in and I felt a moment of happiness after being miserable for so long. “Right, Grace, I’m going to design you the perfect pair.”

“Yes, and when Mam’zelle Clemence finally starts her fashion club, you can actually make them,” said Jess.

“But I haven’t even got pierced ears!” said Grace. “You ought to choose someone else, Katy. I’m just not into jewellery at all.”

“Yes, you are!” Lydia chimed in. “What about that little charm bracelet you’ve got...”

There was a silence, but I didn’t realize anything was wrong till I looked up from my sketchbook and saw that Grace’s face was pale and she was staring at Lydia as though she’d turned into a monster.

“What?” said Jess, sitting up sharply. “What’s wrong, Grace?”

I’d never heard Grace’s voice sound so fragile as it did just then. “How did you know about that bracelet, Lydia?”

The silence was like thin thin glass. Nobody moved. Nobody wanted to step on the glass.

“I...I’ve just seen it, that’s all,” said Lydia, trying to sound casual, but it was obvious she was unsure of herself because she was flipping over the pages of her magazine at top speed and her eyes weren’t focusing on anything.

Grace seemed to be having trouble speaking. Her voice was shaking. “It’s impossible to just *see* it, Lydia. Nobody’s ever seen it because I keep it in my special box at the back of my bottom drawer with my other precious things...”

Lydia’s face flooded with colour and she slapped her magazine shut with a loud huff of annoyance.

Then we all gasped as Grace finished her sentence. “...like my stopwatch.”

The words rang round the dorm as Lydia got up with a face like fury, which she turned on me. “All right, Little Miss Fashion, you don’t have to stare at me like that, you know. You *made* me do it, always trying to push me out and keep Naomi to yourself. Well, I don’t care. There are loads of people who want to be my friend and, unlike some people, I’m not impressed by princesses so you can stuff yourself.”

And with that she left the room. No pushing past people. No floods of tears. Completely calmly, her head held high.

The door clicked shut and the rest of us were left in stunned silence, but it wasn’t like glass any more, it was liquid and flowing, swirling round, buoying me up. I didn’t have to worry now. The missing truth had turned up. One by one I met the eyes of my friends as the silence slowly dissolved and the world came back into focus.

“I knew it!” said Georgie, eyes wide. Then she repeated it slowly as though those were the only words she could manage. “I! KNEW! IT!”

Jess just looked shocked, but Mia leaned her head against mine. “Georgie was right.”

“It must have been awful, Katy,” whispered Grace.

And Naomi looked as if she was going to cry as she put her arms round me and gave me a tight hug. I felt like crying myself then, but not out of sadness – out of big big relief.

“Pretty wise dad I’ve got,” said Naomi, pulling out of the hug and smiling at me with tears in her eyes. “What do you reckon, Katy?”

I grinned back and we high-fived each other. “You’re not kidding!”

Then everyone wanted to know what we were on about, so I had to explain about running into Naomi when I was crying my eyes out and how she’d tried to make me feel better. And Georgie wanted to go through absolutely everything that had happened, and kept saying, “I can’t believe that girl! I just can’t believe her!” And I got hugs and more hugs and sympathetic words that lifted me up and up, until by the time it was bedtime I was on top of the world.

## Chapter Ten



The next day Naomi and I were inseparable. It was a bit embarrassing seeing Lydia at breakfast and in lessons, but the odd thing was that Lydia herself didn't seem at all embarrassed. She'd been right when she'd said that lots of people wanted to be her friend, because every time we came across her she was chatting and laughing with someone or other. She was probably telling them how famous she was in America.

After lunch, Naomi and I walked across to Oakley to find out from Mam'zelle Clemence if Mr. Cary was back yet. I felt so close to Naomi just then that I suddenly had the urge to tell her my secret. After all, we were in exactly the same boat and I knew she'd never ever tell a soul. But just when I was on the point of speaking, we came across a group of older girls coming out of Oakley, and I knew I'd have to wait for another time to share my secret. There was sure to be a perfect moment.

The girls saw Naomi and broke into smiles. "Whooooo, we're very honoured!" one of them said. "A royal visit!"

She wasn't being sarcastic, just joking around, but Naomi looked down and I could tell she was upset.

"Don't listen to Emma!" said another of the girls. "She's only teasing."

The girl called Emma suddenly turned serious. "Yeah, sorry, Naomi. You must get fed up with people going on about it and wanting to get in on your interviews and everything."

"What?!"

Naomi and I had both spoken together but it was Naomi who carried on while I stood there, open-mouthed. "How did you know I did an interview?"

The girl looked surprised. "Sorry, I didn't know it was a secret... I had to deliver a note from Mam'zelle Clemence to Miss Carol one Saturday, and

the door to Miss Carol's flat was open. I went in, but then I could hear that she was busy in the kitchen, so I just crept in and left the note on her table. She'd got visitors and I heard one of them saying that a passing student had just mentioned that she was Naomi's best friend. Then I heard the other one say, 'Amazing, isn't it, how everyone wants to be best friends with a princess? She probably hoped she'd get in on the interview!' And that's how I found out."

Emma shrugged. "Anyway, see ya!" And off they went, leaving the two of us standing there in a state of shock.

Naomi was the first to speak. "So it was Lydia's fault again. I should have realized, shouldn't I? I mean she started acting like my best friend before she even knew me."

"And she acted like she knew exactly what it was like to be a princess, didn't she? I mean she never asked you any questions or anything. She wasn't really interested in who you are at all."

Naomi giggled. "Not like Georgie... Do you remember? On the way up to the dorm when I'd only just arrived?"

"Good old Georgie!" I laughed. "It's just the way she is!"

"I know," smiled Naomi. "And you, Kates," she went on. "You were great...almost as though you really knew what it was like..."

And suddenly there it was. The perfect moment.

"I do."

"Do what?

"Know what it's like. I'm kind of...in the same boat, you see..."

There. I'd said it. But I wasn't cross with myself. I just felt completely calm. I trusted Naomi. She was my best friend.

"In...the same...boat?"

I spoke quietly. "You know I said I went to see Buddy because I was upset about something to do with Mum?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was because I'd just seen her on Lydia's DVD and I suddenly missed her. You see...my mother is Cally Jamieson."

Naomi gasped, then looked at me with big eyes and mouthed the words, "Cally...Jamieson..." in slow motion.

But only a second later her shock seemed to melt away and she was instantly back to her calm self. "Sorry, that's probably the very reaction you don't want!"

“Thank goodness for that. I thought you’d lost the power of speech!”

There was a pause, then Naomi spluttered and we both cracked up laughing because it suddenly seemed such a ridiculous moment. I recovered first.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“You *know* I won’t.” She put her hand on her heart. “I swear on best friendship.”

Then Mam’zelle Clemence’s voice brought us back to the here and now. She was rushing out of Oakley, heading towards the main building.

“Katy! Good news. Mr. Cary is better so zee club can start after haff-terrerm, yes?”

“Oh yes, that’s great!” I agreed as she went by like a whirlwind.

“Look!” said Naomi. “There’s Grace and the others. They look pretty full of something or other!”

Typically it was Grace who got up to us first and she wasn’t even puffed. “I’ve just told Miss Carol the whole story,” she gabbled. “And she said she’d deal with Lydia herself and that we should just leave it alone now...”

“Yes,” said Mia, rushing up, “and Miss Carol said that she’s really proud of Amethyst dorm, especially you, Katy.”

“And she said we mustn’t be too hard on Lydia,” said Jess, “because she’s probably just been homesick, as it affects everyone in different ways and especially if you’re an only child!”

“But she said she’d got a big family!” I spluttered.

“And there’s more,” said Georgie, puffing her way up to us. “Let me tell them this bit, guys.”

The others kept quiet and waited.

Georgie grinned round at us, loving being the centre of attention. “And Miss Carol just *happened* to mention that Lydia’s parents only live about thirty kilometres away!”

“After all that about living in America!” added Mia.

Naomi winked at me, then turned to Georgie. “Well we can top that...”

And as we all walked back to the main building, we told the others what Emma had said.

“Incredible!” said Jess, turning to Naomi. “So, okay, she didn’t do it on purpose, but it was actually Lydia’s fault that your secret was leaked!” Then Jess must have remembered why Naomi and I had been going to Oakley in the first place. “Did you find out about the fashion club, Katy?”

“Yes and it’s...” But my phone had started ringing so I pulled it out of my pocket, glanced at the screen, then pressed the green button ecstatically. “Mum!”

I was only vaguely aware of the others laughing in the background because I was so tuned in to what Mum was saying.

“Oh, Kates! It’s lovely to hear your voice. My phone was stolen – at least that’s what I thought, only it turned up in some grass where we’ve been filming an episode with a baseball match in it – and I’ve been going mad wondering what to do because filming has been so intensive, and then when one of the crew found my phone it was totally wonderful!”

“It’s okay, Mum. I’ve just been panicking that you were cross with me... Did you get my message?”

“No, I haven’t even listened to my messages yet because the moment my phone turned up I wanted to ring you straight away. I’m supposed to be on set right now actually, but they can wait.”

“Well don’t worry... When you pick up the message just ignore it because it turns out that a girl called Lydia took Grace’s stopwatch and planted it on me because she wanted Naomi to stop liking me, but it’s all sorted out now and all the Amethyst team know the truth.”

Mum laughed. “Sounds like something we could use in a *Fast Lane* plot! But I’m glad it’s all sorted out, love, it must have been horrible... You’ll have to tell me all about it in detail when—”

“Yes, I’ll e-mail you the whole story.”

“I was going to say you can tell me when I see you at the weekend.”

I gasped, and all my friends must have realized that Mum had said something incredible, because I was aware of them suddenly standing like statues around me.

“What do you mean, at the weekend, Mum?”

“I’m flying home, Kates. I wanted to be there for you at half-term.”

“That’s the best news ever! I can’t wait! I can tell you all about absolutely everything!”

Mum laughed. “I can’t wait either. Save it all up, love and I’ll see you very soon!”

So I disconnected and looked straight at Naomi, bursting to tell her my wonderful news. “Mum’s flying back so I’ll see her for half-term!”

Naomi grabbed both my hands and we did a mad dance round and round, with me whooping for joy. “What a brill surprise, Kates!” But the bell for

afternoon lessons broke into our happiness.

“So where’s your mum flying back from?” Georgie wanted to know.

And that’s when I suddenly realized I’d forgotten all about my secret for a moment there. At lightning speed, I ran through my side of the phone conversation to check I hadn’t given anything away, then just said, “America. Remember, she works over there.”

“Oh yeah, she’s a styler, isn’t she?” said Georgie.

“Stylist!” everyone corrected her.

And suddenly I didn’t like the lie any more. These were my friends, we were a team. I knew Naomi the best, and probably Jess the least, but I could trust them all. There wasn’t time right now, but I knew in my heart that some time soon I’d tell them my secret. And I also knew they’d guard it with their lives, because of who they are...

*Mia the Musician*

*Grace the Sportswoman*

*Georgie the Actress*

*Jess the Artist*

*Naomi the Wise One*

My true friends.

## School Friends Fun!

So now you've met me and all my friends at Silver Spires, why not have a "dorm party" with your own friends? There's nothing better than a good girly sleepover, and I've got some great ideas to make it even more fun – and you'll get a fab new look into the bargain!

### *How to hold a fashion party*

It's always cool having something new to wear – and it's even better when it's something fab and original that you've created yourself! It's not as hard as you might think. Just set the party scene with some great music, and plenty of drinks and snacks, then get your friends together and try out these ideas...

\* **Give each other makeovers!** Put everyone's clothes and accessories in a big pile and let your friends put an outfit together for you. Don't be afraid to try something new. Even if it's something you never would have chosen yourself, just try it – you might like it!

\* **Customize your own T-shirts!** Add some buttons, feathers, ribbon, patches or sequins...you could even go mad with fabric paint. (Just make sure you check with your parents first!) The only other things you'll need are a needle and thread, or some fabric glue. Hit the shops for more ideas, and unleash the designer in you. And the best bit is that you'll never see anyone wearing the same top as yours!

\* **Make friendship bracelets – it's really easy!** All you need is some coloured embroidery thread from a craft shop. You can find instructions for different patterns online, or even create your own. You and your friends could all make matching bracelets to show you're a team like us! Or maybe you could make a special personalized bracelet to give to your very best friend.

*So what are you waiting for? Grab your friends and have some School Friends fun!*

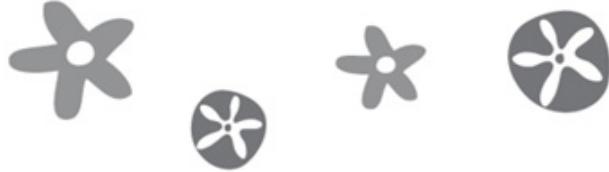
Katy  
x

Now turn the page for a sneak preview of the next unmissable School Friends story...



# Drama at *Silver* *Spires*

## Chapter One



I was staring into the distance with a massive smile on my face, imagining myself on a stage somewhere in the West End of London. The sound of applause was ringing round the auditorium, and I felt the waves of adoration rolling over me as I took yet another bow. But then this totally cool daydream was interrupted by the sound of my best friend, Mia, whispering my name urgently and tapping me on the leg.

“Georgie!”

I came back to earth with a nasty bump, realizing I wasn’t on a stage at all. I was in my school assembly and the headmistress, Ms. Carmichael, was saying the prayer while every single one of the 360 girls in the hall was bowing her head respectfully. Well, everyone except me. I quickly looked down and tried to get myself back into the daydream but got distracted by the sight of a ladder in my tights. It definitely hadn’t been there first thing this morning. I know that for a fact, because Miss Jennings would have spotted it with her eagle eye and made me go back to the dorm to change into a new pair of tights immediately.

Good old Miss Jennings. She’s the matron at Hazeldean, which is my boarding house at Silver Spires school. Most people find her really strict, and it’s true that she keeps her face straight the whole time, which Mia says is totally scary, but personally I like her. The secret is to chat to her lots and tell her jokes and then you can get a smile out of her. Well, *I* can anyway.

Yes *I can!* That makes two things I’m talented at. Acting and getting a smile out of Matron. Hallelujah! I tell you, it’s tough being in a dorm with five other girls who are all completely good-looking and talented. I mean, take Mia. She came to Silver Spires on a music scholarship because she’s so brilliant at piano. Then there’s Grace – she got a sports scholarship. As for Jess, she’d definitely have an art scholarship if there *was* such a thing. And Katy...well she’s the trendiest babe on this planet – I’d love to look like

Katy – and we all just know she'll finish up as a fashion designer because her sketches are amazing and she's obsessed with the whole fashion scene. And finally – and this is the big one – there's Naomi, who is an African princess. She's also extremely beautiful and very wise. It's just not fair that *all* of them are talented. I mean, how am I supposed to compete with that lot? They're all my friends and I love them to death, but I do wish they weren't quite so clever.

Seriously, the only thing I'm good at is acting. Drama has always been my passion. Even when I was only two and a half I used to love dressing up and stuff. My mum said I would stand in the middle of the circle of mothers at baby and toddler group, wearing an apron from the dressing-up box, and entertain everyone by pretending to scrub the floor. Thinking about it, I wonder if I might have developed a bit of a Cinderella obsession, but I don't see how I could have understood the story if I was only two and a half. Aha! Maybe I really am a very bright person but nobody has managed to bring it out of me yet.

“Amen.”

Whoops! I think I must have been in another daydream. Anyway, now Ms. Carmichael had finished the prayer we'd only got the teachers' announcements to go, or notices, as everyone calls them. I wonder why they're called notices when they're not written down. And I also wonder if anyone ever listens to them. I looked round and wasn't surprised to see that most people seemed to have glazed over. Assemblies are probably the most boring part of boarding-school life. Oh and science, and geography...and history. Actually, I can't say I'm a big fan of any lessons except drama. The drama lesson and drama club are the biggest highlights of my week, well, apart from watching *The Fast Lane* on telly, which is my fave programme ever. Drama even beats eating smuggled biscuits after lights out and stifling giggles with my friends in case Miss Carol, the housemistress, hears, or going shopping at the beginning of term before you've spent all your allowance. Now I come to think about it there are hundreds of highlights to boarding-school life – well, to Silver Spires life anyway. Silver Spires is the best school in the world, in case I didn't mention that.

“Georgie!”

Mia was bashing my leg again, but this time when she said my name it didn't sound like a telling-off. In fact for some reason or other Mia was pretty excited. I tuned into what was happening and realized that Miss

Pritchard, the senior drama teacher, was standing up. It's funny because the hall was already silent but it went into an even deeper silence when Miss Pritchard began to speak. And personally I went into ecstasy.

"Some of you will know that the junior play will be staged at the end of term. Anyone in Year Seven, Eight or Nine can audition. The play is called *Castles in the Air* and it's based on the book *Little Women* by Louisa M. Alcott."

My heart hammered with excitement. A play. How brilliant is that? And *Little Women* is my favourite book ever.

"I'm sure many of you will have read the book," went on Miss Pritchard, "and know that the story is centred around four sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy."

Just hearing those four names felt magical, especially the name Amy. That was the sister I always liked reading about the most.

"There are quite a few other substantial roles in the play as well as these four main ones, and there are also lots of smaller roles." Miss Pritchard paused and smiled round at everyone, and I smiled right back. I was suddenly Cinderella again and she was my fairy godmother – *You shall go to the ball!*

I hung on to her every word because I didn't want to miss a thing or get anything wrong. It would be terrible if I didn't show up at the auditions because I hadn't taken in the time properly.

"There's a very high standard of acting at Silver Spires, and traditionally this junior play has always been incredibly well received by the parents, which is important because it's a showcase for the school..." She smiled again but then suddenly looked very serious and spoke in a slow, firm voice. "To produce a fine performance I need total commitment from my actors..."

I stood up straight and stuck out my chin. She could rely on me, all right. I'd learn all my words overnight and turn up at every rehearsal bang on time. I couldn't wait to get started, in fact. *Come on, Miss Pritchard, tell us when the auditions are...*

"So bear that in mind if you're thinking of auditioning for a part. It's great fun being involved in a theatre production but it's also hard work and there are sacrifices to be made, such as missing your favourite clubs sometimes, missing television to learn your lines..."

I didn't care. I'd miss every meal as well, if she wanted me to, even though the meals at Silver Spires are mouth-wateringly yum-worthy and eating is one of my favourite activities in the whole world.

"If you'd like to audition for a part you'll need to come to the senior hall, which, for Year Seven students who don't do drama club, is upstairs and along the main corridor in this building..."

She pointed to the ceiling, and I thought back to my first day at Silver Spires when I'd gone exploring for anything to do with drama, and first come across the senior hall and also seen the incredible new theatre, which looked like something out of the West End of London. It would be so fantastic to perform on that stage.

"I'm going to be doing auditions for Year Nines during their drama lessons on Thursday, and for Year Sevens and Eights after school on Thursday, which gives you a few days to prepare yourselves. I've run off masses of mini-scripts and they're on my desk in my office, which is next to the hall. You can help yourselves to those. Choose a speech by the character you want to audition for, but also come armed with an idea of another role you might be interested in, because, of course, you're not necessarily going to be lucky enough to get the first part you want."

Miss Pritchard sat down and Ms. Carmichael nodded at the music teacher, who pressed play on the CD, and next minute the hall was filled with some beautiful violin music, or was it cello? Who cared? I just wanted to push past everyone filing out neatly row by row, get hold of a script and take it to the dorm, then spend the whole day flopped on my bed learning every single word of every single part.

"Bet you're happy!" said Mia, tucking her arm through mine when we finally got out of the hall.

"You are so right! I am in fact the happiest girl on the planet!" I gabbled as I pulled away and rushed upstairs, taking two steps at a time.

Grabbing a script from the desk in Miss Pritchard's office, I started reading it immediately so I had to walk very slowly to make sure I didn't fall or bash into anyone as I went back downstairs to my friends.

Mia put her arm round me as we left the main building and Grace patted me on the back. "Well done, Georgie! I've never seen you go upstairs so fast!"

Katy laughed. "And look! She's actually concentrating on something. This must be serious!"

“Yes, and it’s not easy concentrating with everyone talking!” I said, throwing her a cross look, which I quickly turned into a grin because how could I feel cross when every single nerve and tendon and sinew and all those other scientific bits of the human body that have always been a mystery to me were glowing brightly and lighting up my life? “I’m going for the part of Amy!” I announced in a voice that came out squeaky with excitement.

It felt so brilliant to hear those words hanging in the air after I’d spoken them that I repeated the main one three times. “Amy, Amy, Amy!” Which gave everyone a giggle. But then Naomi gently reminded us that hanging around waiting for me to collect the script had made us a bit late for science and we ought to get a move on. So we put on a bit of a spurt and caught up with a group of Year Eight girls just ahead. I was still at the back though, walking slowly so I could read the script at the same time.

“I’ve never read *Little Women*,” I heard Jess say. Then she called back to me, “What’s it about? Who’s Amy?”

My mind went straight back to the time when I was nine and I got the book in my Christmas stocking. I hadn’t wanted to read it at first because it looked so old-fashioned, but Mum had actually sat me down and read the first chapter out loud, and after that I’d been hooked. I remember how I used to keep turning to the front cover to have another look at the picture of the sisters, and even now I can visualize Amy, clear as anything. She had blonde hair that curled at the bottom, blue eyes and a cheeky kind of smile, a bit like my little sister, Roxanne. My hair is a sort of medium brown colour and it’s just long enough to put in a ponytail without having any short bits hanging out. It’s quite thick. I used to wish it wasn’t, but actually, now I come to think about it, Amy’s hair looks quite thick. If only I was blonde, that would be even better.

I sighed a happy sigh and caught up with the others. “She’s the youngest of the four March sisters and she’s bright and bubbly...”

“Like you, Georgie!” laughed Naomi. “Typecasting! Terrific!”

“And she’s also very artistic, which I know *isn’t* like me,” I quickly pointed out. “But that’s what acting’s all about.” Then I suddenly realized there was something I hadn’t found out. “Are any of you lot going to audition?”

They all started gabbling away at once so I couldn’t make out what any of them was saying, but I got the general idea that nobody was that keen on

the thought of acting.

"I wonder if the students can help paint the sets and scenery for the stage," said Jess, looking thoughtful.

Katy fell into step beside her. "I think I'll find out who's in charge of costumes. I'd love to be—"

One of the Year Eight girls we were passing flung a very haughty look in our direction and interrupted Katy in a know-all voice. "Mrs. Chambers looks after the wardrobe department, actually, but she won't let you help. She only lets Year Nines."

Katy looked disappointed and Naomi obviously felt sorry for her. "You can always ask, anyway, Kates," she said quietly. "But we'd better go now or we'll be late..."

"See you back at Hazeldean, you two," Mia called over her shoulder as she and Grace went jogging off to their lab with Naomi and Katy, because the four of them are all in set one for science.

Jess and I carried on walking with the Year Eights and I wished I had the guts to turn to the know-all girl and say, "Did you write the book of life or something?" But Year Sevens don't talk to Year Eights like that. It's just not done.

"Do the students get to help with the set?" Jess asked her.

The girl shrugged and the expression on her face said she couldn't care less about such a trivial little thing. "You'll have to check with the art department. I'm an actor."

Jess said, "Right," then stopped walking as she seemed to suddenly remember something. "Oh no!" she said. "I've totally forgotten my science textbook – I'll have to run back and get it. Save me a place, Georgie, okay?" And off she went.

As soon as she'd gone, *know-all features* nodded at the script I was clutching. "So what part are you going for?"

"Amy."

"Amy!" She did a little snort of laughter as though I'd announced that I intended to be the director or something.

Then all her friends started smirking. One of them turned to the know-all girl and said, "Wooo, competition for you, Cara," in a sarcastic tone of voice, which made everyone burst into laughter. And another girl rolled her eyes and said, "As if!" which really made my hackles rise.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

“Sorry,” said Cara, shaking her head slowly. “I shouldn’t laugh really because you’re not to know, being Year Seven...”

I didn’t like the way she flashed her eyes round all the time she was talking, like she was checking that everyone was still looking at her.

“Know what?”

“Well...” She sighed, and spoke really slowly as though all Year Sevens were thick. “I mean...you did realize that Amy is one of the four main roles, didn’t you? Sorry, what’s your name?”

“Georgie.” Then I was suddenly sick of being patronized. “Course I realized. I’m not stupid. Anyway, are you going to audition?”

She exchanged a look with one of her friends and it was the friend who answered. “Obviously. She’s the best actress in Silver Spires. She had a main part in last year’s play even though she was only Year Seven, you know. And that *never* happens.”

“So, what part are you going for?” I asked casually.

She reached into her pocket and I wondered for a second whether she’d written it down for some unknown reason, but then she pulled out a little tin, undid it and smeared lipgloss onto her lips. At that moment she just seemed to fancy herself so much that I really hated her, even though I hardly knew her. It wasn’t till she’d put the tin back and rubbed her lips together that she finally deigned to look at me. “Amy,” came the answer. She smiled mockingly and my heart sank, but then I tried to give myself a firm talking-to. Just because everyone thought Cara was a really good actress, it didn’t mean that she’d automatically get the part of Amy, did it? And anyway, who was to say she was any better than me? I’d had big parts in every single play at primary school, right from when I was the enormous turnip in the harvest festival in Year One, to when I played Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Year Six.

We’d arrived at the science block so I gave Cara the coolest look I could manage while I tried to think of some clever parting line, but then I realized her eyes were on my right leg and she was trying to stop herself smirking. I guessed she was looking at the ladder in my tights and I made the mistake of glancing down and saw that the stupid thing had risen from my ankle to just above my knee, getting wider and wider as it went up. Normally I don’t care about things like that but I did at this moment. It made me feel stupid.

“It’s only a ladder, you know!” said my big mouth before my brain had chance to stop it.

She just stared at me as though I was pathetic.

“See you at the auditions then,” I said casually.

She still didn’t answer, and as I went into the science block my ears were on full alert, listening out for sniggers. I didn’t hear any, but that’s not to say the oh-so-clever Cara wasn’t smirking and exchanging looks with her friends. I tell you, it was a big relief when the door closed behind me.

To find out what happens next, read



## About the Author

### Ann Bryant's School Days

*Who was your favourite teacher?*

At primary it was Mr. Perks – we called him Perksy. I was in his class in Year Six, and most days he let me work on a play I was writing! At secondary, my fave teacher was Mrs. Rowe, simply because I loved her subject (French) and she was so young and pretty and slim and chic and it was great seeing what new clothes she'd be wearing.

*What were your best and worst lessons?*

My brain doesn't process history, geography or science and I hated cookery, so those were my least favourite subjects. But I was good at English, music, French and PE, so I loved those. I also enjoyed art, although I was completely rubbish at it!

*What was your school uniform like?*

We had to wear a white shirt with a navy blue tie and sweater, and a navy skirt, but there was actually a wide variety of styles allowed – I was a very small person and liked pencil-thin skirts. We all rolled them over and over at the waist!

*Did you take part in after-school activities?*

Well I loved just hanging out with my friends, but most of all I loved ballet and went to extra classes in Manchester after school.

*Did you have any pets while you were at school?*

My parents weren't animal lovers so we were only allowed a goldfish! But since I had my two daughters, we've had loads – two cats, two guinea pigs, two rabbits, two hamsters and two goldfish.

*What was your most embarrassing moment?*

When I was in Year Seven I had to play piano for assembly. It was April Fool's Day and the piano wouldn't work (it turned out that someone had put a book in the back). I couldn't bring myself to stand up and investigate because that would draw attention to me, so I sat there with my hands on the keys wishing to die, until the Deputy Head came and rescued me!

To find out more about Ann Bryant, visit her website:

[www.annbryant.co.uk](http://www.annbryant.co.uk)

Want to know more about the Silver Spires girls?

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